

The *SBJT* Forum: Evangelical Responses to Postmodernism

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Scott Hafemann, D. A. Carson, C. Ben Mitchell, and Timothy George have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What is the impact of postmodernism on contemporary, evangelical hermeneutics?

Scott Hafemann: Postmodernism seeks to be "honest" when it declares that what controls the interpretation of the Bible has never been the biblical text itself, but rather the particular political, ethnic, religious, and gender paradigms from which one approaches the material. Rather than covering this up, or trying to resist it (unless it doesn't like one's particular political community!), postmodern hermeneutics celebrates the captivity of the text, inasmuch as language is not to be understood as referential in regard to "objective" realities outside itself. Instead, language is a socially conditioned set of signs or codes reflecting the experience-produced values of its community. Interpretations are not "valid" or "invalid," but acceptable (i.e., useful) or not acceptable (not useful) to one's community or self. The goal in life (reading "texts," written and unwritten, is basic to life itself!) is not to adjudicate interpretations, but to balance competing political agendas. After all, there is nothing more subjective and ideologically driven than the violent act

of reading.

Consequently, like the ancient (remember Origen), medieval (with its "four-fold sense of Scripture"), and modern (demythologizing is allegory in disguise!) Church before it, postmodernism within Christian circles has given birth to a form of the allegorical method in which the interpreter determines what the text "really meant" *in loco auctoris*. Unlike the past, however, postmodernism no longer maintains that the Holy Spirit, Church, or enlightenment scholarship, coming to us from *outside* ourselves, leads us into the hidden truths of Scripture. Instead, postmodern Christianity preaches that it is the Experience of the reader itself, or of a community as Reader, that informs or reforms the text in accordance with its own filters as determined by its cultural identity, gender, or political community. The Holy Spirit, in speaking to us, has become us. To read the Bible is to create out of it a "black theology," "feminist theology," "post-conservative evangelical theology," "Southern Baptist theology," "Hispanic theology," or, in my case, "a white, upper-mid-west, Calvinistic, believer's church, post-60s theology" in accordance with our

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social (ecclesiological) location. Thus, what is essential for understanding the Bible is not a thorough knowledge of the ancient world and its languages, but a self-conscious reflection on one's own "theology" as determined by one's social status, gender relationships, community traditions, and political aspirations.

Though it is hermeneutically and spiritually wrong-headed, there are, nevertheless, some things that evangelicals can learn from postmodernism (what a non-postmodern, value-laden thing to say!). The challenge it poses to the *often* (not always) unreflective hubris within scholarship is salutary. The willingness of postmodern Christians to rethink even our most cherished interpretive conclusions is a welcomed stimulus to look at overly "familiar" texts with new eyes. There is no doubt, for example, that a "black" or "Presbyterian" reading of the text *may* uncover aspects of the author's original intention that my "white," Baptist reading has missed (though it may also obscure it all the more). Finally, the warning raised by postmodernism that "interpretations" of a text are often (not always) thinly veiled expressions of our own ideologies is a sobering wake-up call to be self-critical whenever we read the Bible.

As my qualifications indicate, however, postmodernism's hermeneutical relativism and often radical rejection of a subject-object distinction cannot be assimilated into the biblical conception of revelation within history that is central to evangelicalism. Many evangelicals have gravitated toward postmodernism, believing that its celebration of diversity, its skepticism concerning the reigning scientific paradigms, and its openness to community-based hermeneutics enable us to "sit at the table" of public discourse

without being ashamed of our belief in the Scriptures. However, once we share our conviction that our particular, historically revealed truth claims, derived through reading an ancient book, are *universally* valid, we will find ourselves once again marginalized as silent partners who may be tolerated, but not allowed to speak. The force of postmodernism's pluralism is just as strong as historical-criticism's naturalism.

An Evangelical Alternative

The Church's use of the Bible down through the ages reflects the fact that in the ongoing struggle to come to grips with the dual nature of Scripture, the predominant movement in each age has been away from the author's intention toward a "spiritual" reading of the text. In such an approach, the referents of the language are no longer determined by the author's intention as expressed within its original historical context. Thus, the hermeneutical goal of the allegorical method, whether ancient, modern, or postmodern, is the same: rather than limiting itself to seeing reality through the eyes of the God-inspired author (assuming that it can be done), it uses the biblical affirmations as mere stimuli or conduits for one's own cherished traditions and experience.

Over against this mainstream move toward allegory, many evangelicals, past and present, have rejected this common hermeneutical move. They do so because of their acceptance of the Reformation's insistence on the *formal, intrinsic* nature of the Bible as *authoritative*: God has revealed his truth *in* the Scriptures. Hence, the Bible is not authoritative because of what we make of it, but because of what it *is*. Following the Reformation principle, they do not view the Bible as the expression of

God's truth *because* they are evangelicals; they are evangelicals *because* they hold this view of the Bible. The Bible's "extrinsic authority" (i.e., the supreme and final authority that the Bible possesses in our lives) derives from its "intrinsic authority" (i.e., the authority that the Bible possesses due to what it is, quite apart from whether anyone recognizes it). The Bible is our final authority because it is authoritative; it is not authoritative because we consider it to be our authority.

Such affirmations have always been revolutionary, whether in our postmodern age or in Luther's day, with its tradition-dominant culture and the emerging subjectivism of pietism. What makes them so is not merely their content, with its unashamedly orthodox view of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures (i.e., the *definition* of the Bible's intrinsic authority resides in the nature of the Bible itself), but also their implication that the "location" of authority resides in the Bible itself, not its readers.

Thus, when Reformation-conscious evangelicals disagree with one another or with other traditions of the Church, they strive to do so not merely as an expression of their socio-historical-political location. They are not postmodern in this sense. Nor do they do so because of their own religious consciousness. They are not "modern" in this sense. Nor do they do it because the Spirit revealed the truth to those in authority over them, be it their pastor, their creed, or their grandmother. They are not medieval in this sense. And they do not do so because "the Spirit told them what the Bible says or means." They are not pietists in this sense. When they disagree, they do so because of what the Bible "says," as they understand it. This sounds naive in our day and age. But what

must be maintained at all costs is the confidence that responsible interpreters can reach common understandings that are worth fighting over in pursuit of the truth! The corollary to God's self-revelation in time and space is the "old-fashioned" "two-step" hermeneutic—if God spoke to and through his prophets, Son, and apostles, then it follows that God can be "heard" in the grammar and syntax that make up the deposit of that divine speech.

The Evangelical "Postmodern"

It is at this point that the plot thickens. As evangelicals, we believe that God has revealed himself *in*, not *through*, the Scriptures. God's revelation in history is inextricably linked to his self-revelation in the historical documents of the Bible. Thus, our confidence in the authority of the Scriptures and in the possibility of a responsible interpretation can only exist because and to the degree that we recognize not only *sola Scriptura*, but also the corresponding Reformation doctrine of the *clarity* of the Scriptures that must accompany it. If we shrink back from such an affirmation, all of our talk about the authoritative *nature* of the Scriptures will be ship-wrecked because of our failure to take seriously its *functional sufficiency*.

Nevertheless, despite Scripture's clarity (not to be confused with simplicity), sincere Christians must admit that we have strong disagreements concerning how we parse out the non-essentials of our faith, not to mention what constitutes a non-essential in the first place. Luther, from whom we received the formulation of *sola Scriptura*, would violently disagree with many Baptist interpretations and applications of the Scriptures. Though our disagreements are painful, and though churches and institutions may even divide

over doctrinal issues, such honest disagreements over the interpretation and application of the Bible are not the real problem. Indeed, such differences among Christians affirm that we are not the locus of revelation and make it clear that neither side may claim the Holy Spirit as a substitute authority for seeking to ascertain the original meaning of the text. In so doing, they remind us that the Spirit's role in biblical interpretation is not to tell us what the Bible means, thereby short-circuiting history with a personal or institutional mysticism, but to soften our moral dispositions so that we are willing to go where the text leads us. For in the end, people will believe only what they *want* to believe.

At this point, the plot not only thickens, it unravels altogether. In response to our differences of conviction, and under the influence of postmodernism's support for our own history of subjectivism, many of our evangelical churches no longer ask *what* the Bible says and *how* it is to be applied in our lives. Now the question is often whether it is epistemologically *possible* or even *desirable* to rediscover the meaning of the Bible in the first place. Without knowing it, we often "out postmodern" the postmoderns! The subjectivity of our culture has infiltrated our seminaries and churches to such a degree that the Reformation conviction that the intention, clarity, accessibility, and relevance of the biblical text is available to those who labor sufficiently to understand it with dispositions reformed by the Spirit is no longer widely held.

Under the weight of this extreme subjectivism, all that is left, at best, is the immediate significance of the Bible to me or my church or cell group, divorced from any attempt to rediscover the author's

original intention. Hence, the issue facing us today is not that of the application of an authoritative Word from God in the Scriptures, but whether we still believe in such a thing. I am afraid that for all our talk about an authoritative Bible, the way the Bible is "studied" and "preached" in most American churches shows that we do not.

In the place of a biblical theology undergirded by an author-centered hermeneutic that is consonant with biblical authority, many of our people and pastors have unwittingly substituted a subjectivism that isolates us from one another. As a result, our affirmations of biblical authority become a hollow excuse to teach and believe whatever we want. Ironically, such subjectivism, on a larger scale, can also lead to a retreat into creedalism when faced with the challenge or hard work of supporting their positions biblically. Since postmodernism is in the air we breathe these days, these substitutions seem normal and feel natural. Though we are not so bold as to join the popular culture in declaring explicitly that all truth is relative, and although the vast majority have not adopted the most extreme forms of "reader response criticism," we do dare to proclaim, without blinking, that this or that is what the Bible means to *me*. Like their secular, postmodern counterparts, Christian postmoderns have created an idol of an authoritative Self, with its subjectivist approach to truth, which is then used to personalize the authority of the Bible in their lives under a false sense of humility. Instead of propositional truths, experience becomes the subject matter of theology.

As a result, the hard philological and historical work of interpreting the Bible in its original context seems more trouble

than it is worth spiritually. Moreover, because such a Christian subjectivism can still be trumpeted under the guise of a belief in biblical “authority,” it is even more deceptive than its secular counterpart. In view of the many historical, social, and ethical challenges facing those who confess that the Bible is their authority, it is easy to see why our people and leaders have often opted for the quickest and safest way out of their uncertainties by resorting to religious experience. This is the history of our culture, the history of Protestant liberalism, and the history of religious pietism.

Armed with *sola Scriptura*, Luther fought the papacy; now we must fight ourselves. Our authority resides in our accurate interpretations of the Bible, not in our piety, our enthusiasm, our programs, our ethnic identity, our sexual preferences, our social conscience, or our entertaining personalities. All interpretations are not created equal, simply because they are held with equal sincerity and passion. The role of the community of faith is not to baptize all interpretations as equally valid, but to help arbitrate between competing views of what the Bible says.

SBJT: What positive things can be said about postmodernism?

D. A. Carson: The question is important, since many Christians of conservative stamp have given the impression that postmodernism is entirely evil, and begin to act as if a knee-jerk reversion to modernism is a good thing. They forget, perhaps, that modernism has not always proved a stalwart friend of confessional Christianity. It is surely a better thing to recognize that both modernism and postmodernism include some elements with

which thoughtful Christians may happily align themselves, and some elements with which they strongly disagree.

So that we are all on the same page, I should specify what I mean by “modernism” and “postmodernism.” For the purposes of these reflections, I am referring to competing approaches of epistemology. Modernist epistemology begins with the finite “I,” is convinced of the power of autonomous reason, is profoundly foundationalist, and holds to both the desirability and the accessibility of objective truth. It strives for universal truth, for truth characterized by ahistorical universality, and it governs its proceedings by heavy dependence on controlled methods.

Postmodern epistemology also begins with the finite “I,” but finds this finite “I” to be a barrier to knowledge of objective reality. Profoundly suspicious of foundationalism and convinced that a multiplicity of methods breeds a rich multiplicity of perspectives, it denies that objective truth is accessible, and doubts that it is desirable.

Thoughtful Christians should buy into neither epistemology. The dangers and weaknesses of postmodern epistemology have been catalogued elsewhere. But its strengths are at least four:

(1) It grasps the entailments of human finiteness; it recognizes that, precisely because we begin with the finite “I,” our foundations, like our methods, our speech, our perspectives, our cultural limitations, our assumptions, are constraints that we cannot escape. Christians will surely want to applaud this. In fact, in one crucial respect, we will go farther than the postmoderns. We insist not only on human finiteness, but also on the noetic effects of the fall. Our minds, we insist, are not only small and limited, but

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also corrupt and self-serving.

(2) The most effective critique of modernist arrogance during the past thirty years has surely been postmodern epistemology. We may not like the conclusions postmodernism draws from this, and we will certainly want to critique postmoderns in turn, but we are grateful for the attack on modernist arrogance. Postmodernism does not really point the epistemological way forward; for those with eyes to see, it does effectively condemn the way we have been.

(3) In some ways, postmodernism is confirmed by various facets of our experience, and in turn illumines our experience. When I think and talk and write, I do so as a middle-aged, white, Canadian, male. I do not look at things exactly the way my sister in Christ does who is black, poor, elderly, unschooled, and from (say) Alabama; or as my brother does who is young, black, well-educated, privileged, and the head of a major institution in Kenya.

For several years, I organized study groups for the World Evangelical Fellowship. My brief was to bring together confessing evangelical thinkers from many difference races, from various denominations and countries, to work on assigned topics. Most of us had had reasonably good to excellent training; all of us held to the view that the Scriptures as originally given are God's inerrant Word. Yet the differences that surfaced when we gathered together were fascinating. These differences extended beyond forms of arguments (e.g., the Germans and Norwegians were direct and forthright; the Japanese were courteous and circumlocutory). For instance, when dealing with many texts in Paul, North Americans instantly tended to think of individualistic interpre-

tations and applications; black Africans from south of the Sahara tended to think in terms of communal interpretations and applications. The differences prompted all of us to re-examine our presuppositions, our cultural biases. In the past, many thought that the best-educated white Westerners were naturally most likely to be right; and if we ourselves were not right, then at least our approach to all questions was fundamentally right. Experience is teaching us a little humility, and postmodernism is helping with the instruction. I cannot say I am displeased. In an age where we have become more aware than ever before of the global church, there are things here for which to be grateful. (Of course, the most consistent postmodernists would say that all of our differing interpretations were equally "right" or "wrong": there is no particular value in attempting to reach consensus, they would say, for even that consensus would be nothing more than one more opinion from one more interpretative group. I cannot agree, of course but my purpose here is not to respond to postmodernism's errors, but to voice gratitude for the places it is right.)

(4) Similarly, postmodernism has insisted, rightly, that there are different ways of learning and knowing. That was sometimes grudgingly admitted a little earlier, but intellectual leaders often powerfully articulated preference for foundationalism, linear thinking, and methodological control. Some domains of thought, I would argue, are particularly well suited to such approaches. But some are not. Very often there are intuitive "leaps" that depend in no small measure on such things as cultural background, experience, prior reading, maturity, and grief. As we reflect on the people we know

who have become Christians as adults, how many of them closed with Christ primarily out of a linear, logical, cerebral pursuit of truth?

I am not arguing for irrationality. To study the evangelistic sermons of Paul (for instance) is to think through how to address diverse cultures with the universals of the universal gospel, what Jude calls the gospel once for all delivered to the saints. We are to give reasons to everyone who asks us about the hope we have in Christ. Nevertheless, human experience is so complex, and the workings of the Spirit so powerful and hard to analyze (reflect on 1 Cor 2:6-16), that we soon tumble to the fact that few men and women come to a true knowledge of Christ in a straight epistemological line.

Does not Scripture itself tell us that people will know we are Christ's disciples by our love (John 13:34-35)? How many secular, postmodern young people today are first attracted to our better churches by the sheer authenticity of the corporate worship and of the human relationships found in our churches? They sometimes think of what they see as "spirituality"—a notoriously slippery word. At the least, they are seeing spiritual authenticity, the authentic fruit of the Spirit of God. Such experience by itself does not articulate the gospel, of course; but articulations of the gospel apart from the witness of transformed living often strike postmoderns as remarkably sterile, inauthentic, and "unspiritual." And insofar as postmodernism calls us to recognize the complexities of human knowing, it is a welcome relief to the reductionisms of modernism.

SBJT: Where can we look for models for ministry in a

postmodern culture?

C. Ben Mitchell: I believe we can find models for ministry in a postmodern culture by looking to *premodern* sources. Like our postmodern (or, if you wish "hypermodern") era, the premodern era was religiously pluralistic. The methods used by our *premodern* forebears may prove extremely insightful for *postmodern* ministry.

I was reminded recently of the writings of Athenagoras, a Christian philosopher of the second half of the second century after Christ. Athenagoras may have been converted while he was a philosopher in Athens. He was probably the first head of the catechetical school at Alexandria. Shortly after the persecution of Christians in Lyons and Vienne, around AD 177, Athenagoras penned his treatise, *A Plea for the Christians*.¹ He wrote as a "Philosopher and Christian" to emperors Marcus Aurelius Anoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus to protest the injustices shown toward Christians. His treatise can be divided into four parts. Chapters 1-3 introduce the topic and present the charges leveled against the Christians; chapters 4-30 respond to the charge of atheism; chapters 31-36 respond to the charges of incest and cannibalism among Christians; and chapter 37 is his conclusion.

Christians were alleged to have committed three offenses: atheism (because they only had one God), "Thyestean feasts" (because they spoke of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ), and "Oedipodean intercourse" (because they called one another, including their husbands and wives, "brother" and "sister"). Athenagoras spends most of his time addressing the charge of atheism. Interestingly, among other important arguments, he maintains that Christian

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doctrine affirms “one God, Maker of this universe, who is Himself uncreated (for that which is does not come to be, but that which is not) but has made all things by the Logos which is from Him . . .” (Chapter 4). This affirmation is rooted in scriptural authority. Says Athenagoras,

we have for witnesses of the things we apprehend and believe, prophets, men who have pronounced concerning God and the things of God, guided by the Spirit of God. And you too will admit, excelling all others as you do in intelligence and in piety towards the true God, that it would be irrational for us to cease to believe in the Spirit of God, who moved the mouths of the prophets like musical instruments, and to give heed to mere human opinions (Chapter 7).

The Christian community of which Athenagoras was familiar was a community committed to the authority of the biblical witness. Their doctrines were grounded in the Bible and were, therefore, countercultural.

Even more interestingly, this countercultural community of Christians was marked by an unmistakable and undeniable integrity. In fact, Athenagoras appeals to what we might call a “Christian aesthetic” in order to defend Christians against the false charges of their detractors.

To refute the charges that Christians were immoral, Athenagoras says,

For as you excel all men in intelligence, you know that those whose life is directed towards God as its rule, so that each one among us may be blameless and irreproachable before Him, will not entertain even the thought of the slightest sin. For if we believed that we should live only the present life, then we might be suspected of sinning, through being enslaved to flesh and blood,

or overmastered by gain or carnal desire; but since we know that God is witness to what we think and what we say both by night and by day, and that He, being Himself light, sees all things in our heart, we are persuaded that when we are removed from this present life we shall live another life, better than the present one, and heavenly, not earthly (since we shall abide near God, and with God, free from all change or suffering in the soul, not as flesh, even though we shall have flesh, but as heavenly spirit), or, falling with the rest, a worse one and in fire; for God has not made us as sheep or beasts of burden, a mere by-work, and that we should perish and be annihilated. On these grounds it is not likely that we should wish to do evil, or deliver ourselves over to the great Judge to be punished (Chapter 21).

When he comes to the charge of incest, Athenagoras responds, “But we are so far from practicing promiscuous intercourse, that it is not lawful among us to indulge even a lustful look. ‘For,’ saith He, ‘he that looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery already in his heart’” (Chapter 32). He goes on to add, “For our account lies not with human laws, which a bad man can evade (at the outset I proved to you, sovereign lords, that our doctrine is from the teaching of God), but we have a law which makes the measure of our rectitude to consist in dealing with our neighbor as ourselves” (Ibid).

Indeed, Athenagoras boldly states that Christians are the moral antithesis of the pagan world around them.

But though such is our character (Oh! Why should I speak of things unfit to be uttered), the things said of us are an example of the proverb, “The harlot reproves the chaste.” For those who have set up a market for fornication and established infamous resorts for the young for every kind of vile pleasure, who do

not abstain even from males, males with males committing shocking abominations, outraging all the noblest and comeliest bodies in all sorts of ways, so dishonoring the fair workmanship of God (for beauty on earth is not self-made, but sent hither by the hand and will of God), these men, I say, revile us for the very things which they are conscious of themselves, and ascribe to their own gods, boasting of them as noble deeds, and worthy of the gods (Chapter 34).

Finally, he argues that Christians are gentle and detest all cruelty. “For when they know that we cannot endure even to see a man put to death, though justly; who of them can accuse of murder or cannibalism.” Christians are, in fact, marked by their respect for human life.

How, then, when we do not even look on, lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put people to death? And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard every fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s care, and when it has passed into life to kill it; and not to expose an infant, because he who exposes them are chargeable with child-murder, and on the other hand, when it has been reared to destroy it (Chapter 35).

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Communicating to premoderns required that the Christian community not only affirm the truth, but also practiced the truth faithfully and consistently. Athenagoras could say to the emperors, “we are pious, and gentle, and temperate in spirit” (Chapter 37). He had to be able to say that with confidence that his fellow Christians would actually demonstrate those virtues. If they did not, Athenagoras

would be made to look like a fool. More importantly, the Christian God would be made to look like an imposter.

The question I have had to ask myself in the face of postmodern opposition to Christianity is: “Can I, like Athenagoras, point to a Christian community that is pious, gentle, temperate, and committed to a consistent lifestyle of countercultural, transformative witness?” I fear that I cannot. Christian communities (i.e., churches) are, more often than not, fragmented organizations that reflect the surrounding culture more than their namesake, the Christ.

Our witness before a postmodern culture demands a commitment to biblical authority and the truths revealed through Scripture. But unless our affirmations are supported by a faithful Christian aesthetic, our witness will lack the credibility and authenticity postmoderns crave. If we are to reach postmoderns, we will do so as our communities begin to live above reproach. We must live in such a way that we could say concerning our churches what Athenagoras said of the church of his day, “for with God we stand in good repute” (Chapter 31).

ENDNOTE

¹Available at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-46.htm.

SBJT: How should evangelicals respond to postmodernism?

Timothy George: Back in the not so distant dark ages of the 1960s, as an undergraduate in a state university majoring in history and philosophy, I was indoctrinated into the reigning myth of modernity. Our textbook was J. H. Randall’s *The Making of the Modern Mind*. Our litany of

unassailable assumptions went like this: Reason is king. God is dead, or at least in the emergency room. The supernatural is not real. Science overrules anything mysterious. Utopia awaits. Man (even liberals used “man” generically back then) is the measure of all things. Along with many others, I found great help in the writings of Francis Schaeffer, who taught us to criticize this myth in the light of biblical revelation and the Christian faith. We learned how to de-construct the modern worldview and many of us developed an apologetic of “evidences that demanded a verdict.”

Now, three and a half decades later, both the modern worldview we were taught and our efforts at a Christian counter-punch seem equally *passé*. (Schaeffer warned us about this had we only listened.) Today we find ourselves in a sea change commonly spoken of as the shift from modernism to postmodernism. The very essence of postmodernism (an ironic phrase in itself) is that it has no essence, it resists definition. Still, there is widespread agreement on all sides that the cultural space we inhabit is marked by incredible fluidity, diversity, and instability.

The evolving paradigm of our culture is marked by four shifts in particular, each with profound implications for the way we articulate the unchanging Gospel of Jesus Christ: (1) The conversion of theology into ideology, i.e., the displacement of the dogmatic pattern of Christian truth based upon divine revelation by a revitalized perspectivalism; (2) the shift from a secularized worldview to a resacralized cosmos, as evidenced in the New Age movement, the new hunger for supernatural realities, the spread of the occult, etc.; (3) the attenuation of national iden-

tity in favor of an interconnected global economy and social reality; and (4) the weakening of old denominational loyalties in favor of new ecumenical and transdenominational affiliations. Each of these shifts directly affects the evangelical church and its future in this new millennium. They impinge respectively on (1) Our confessional commitment to the normative authority of Holy Scripture; (2) our efforts to train effective evangelists and apologists of the Christian Gospel; (3) our concern for world missions and global evangelization; and (4) the call to reach across traditional boundaries without compromising biblical truth for the sake of the Gospel.

It would be a mistake, of course, to assume that modernism is really dead, gone forever like the Berlin Wall. No, we live now “between the times,” in the shadowy interval between the death throes of one world and the birth pangs of another. In this ideological no-man’s-land we live side by side with competing exclusives. Rampant secularism and postmodern spiritualities coexist on the same campuses, in the same journals, and sometimes in the same churches.

Bible-believing, evangelical Christians should beware of those guides who counsel an uncritical embrace of postmodern sensibilities. Nor should we hearken to reactionary voices who fail to discern the *kairos* of the postmodern moment, a moment not unlike that faced by the early church as it undertook its God-given mission amidst the collapse of pagan antiquity.

The Gospel we proclaim, based on the authoritative Word of the one, true and living God, is addressed to everyone everywhere as the truth that sets men and women free. We can learn from the

postmodernist critique to oppose all oppressive and destructive uses of God's wonderful truth. But, as the 2000 Amsterdam Declaration says, we must also oppose "all skeptical and relativising or syncretizing trends, whether rationalist or irrationalist, that treat the Gospel as not fully true, and so unable to lead believers into the new divine life that it promises them."