

**“Apologetic Cartography in a Postmodern World:
Does Anyone Have a Compass?”**
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[NOTE: The following manuscript was delivered with animated PowerPoint and video clips, so the impact of the material will be different from its original setting. Each paragraph had a correlating PowerPoint slide or video clip. Send any comments, concerns, or questions to Rich Knopp at the address/email provided above. Please properly credit any citations used from this paper.]

Without question, we are living at a time in which the terms “Postmodern” and “Postmodernism” are used prolifically by non-Christians and Christians alike. They are frequently employed by academics and professionals in the universities and the seminaries. But sometimes they are flaunted even by people who have little idea what they mean.

Even if you don’t really know what terms like “modernism,” “postmodernism,” “deconstructionism,” and “anti-foundationalism” mean, they can sound pretty impressive. I sometimes tell my students that if they learn a new term that has more than five syllables, they should write their parents, use that word several times in the letter, and ask them to send more money right away. The strategy has a good chance of working, because their parents will be totally confused; yet they will think that their son or daughter has *really* been studying.

You may not know much about Modernism or Postmodernism, but you likely already have a preference toward one or the other. For example, if you’re more of a Modernist, you’ll especially appreciate my manuscript that is available. It’s a systematic presentation of what I want to say and it’s more conducive to a rational and critical analysis.

If you’re more of a Postmodernist—even if you don’t know you are—you’ll be bored with the manuscript after the first five sentences. You’ll probably walk out of this session and look for some friends to “hang out” with. If you’re interested in the topic at all, you’re more likely to wait for the multimedia DVD to be released.

Whether you’re more inclined toward Modernism or Postmodernism, I hope I’ll have something of value for you.

My concern today is not just Postmodernism per se, but on how Postmodernism is affecting the church and the thinking of Christians. As with most things, there is an array of responses that Christians are giving to Postmodernism. Some are totally ignorant of it and disinterested in it. Some are curious enough at least to take a look. Some think Postmodernism deserves a little attention. Others apparently feel that PM should be welcomed as a dear friend. Some believe that it is an “angelic God-send” to the church. And others are convinced that PM is the most Satanic philosophy since the serpent slithered his way through the garden.

Although I hope to say something helpful to all of you, I want to offer several challenges to three distinct groups of people: (1) I want to challenge those who are ignoring Postmodernism to stop it—that is, stop ignoring it; (2) I want to challenge those who are ignorantly attacking Postmodernism to stop being so ignorant about it; and (3) I want to challenge those who are ignominiously adopting it to be more cautious about aligning yourself too closely with it. In general, I would like to challenge all of you to join a new group—a group that recognizes that Postmodernism is both good and bad; that understanding Postmodernism is critically important for the church today; and that appropriately utilizing the insights of Postmodernism can help the church be more biblical in its theology, more effective in its evangelism, more wonderful in its worship, and more fruitful in its fellowship.

As you can see from the title of this session, “Apologetic Cartography in a Postmodern World: Does Anyone Have a Compass?” I want to orient you to Postmodernism and its relevance to the church by prompting you to think about maps. I realize that some of you are not terribly interested in geography and that some of you, especially you *men*, apparently have a genetic predisposition against touching a map. My guess is, however, that almost all of you used a map to get here this week and you even used one to find this room. If you didn’t personally use a map, in all probability you took directions from someone who did.

It’s interesting that the motif of maps has been prominently used in several notable Christian publications that discuss Postmodernism. For example, Robert Greer has an excellent book entitled *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options*.

And Part One of Leonard Sweet’s book, *Aqua Church*, is titled “The Traps of Maps.” He insightfully balances the value of maps with their limitations.

I think that cartography—the art of making maps—can generate an extremely useful analogy in understanding the problems and the possibilities in presenting and defending our Christian faith in this Postmodern world.

Our culture desperately needs a map. But a map by itself is of no value unless people have some idea of where they are on that map. And a major problem is that our culture doesn’t really know where it is.

In its simplest terms, the Christian mission consists of three basic tasks: showing people where they are, pointing them where they need to go, and guiding them in how to get there.

On the one hand, I believe that our Postmodern world is forcing us into a new territory that will allow the church to identify new and productive soil to sow the gospel and reap its harvest. On the other hand, I think that our Postmodern world is making our basic task more difficult. First, it is difficult because too many Christians do not even recognize where *they* are; they have little understanding of their location in a larger environment that is so heavily influenced by Postmodernism; and as a result, they do not sufficiently understand where the spiritually lost are or how to reach them. Secondly, it is difficult because so many in our Postmodern world claim that there is no single destination for everyone; in principle, there are as many different legitimate destinations as there are travelers. A third reason why our Christian mission is difficult today is that many outside the church, and some inside the church, are repudiating the existence of, or the necessity for, any universal standard or an absolute truth that could effectively function as a compass to guide others where they need to go.

In a culture that is prides itself on rejecting anything that is true for everybody, somehow the church must be “the pillar and support for the truth”; it must learn how to “speak the truth in love” more effectively; and it must confidently continue to present Jesus Christ alone as the “way and the truth.”

In my attempt to do some cartography for the church, I want to talk about

1. The Condition of our 'Postmodern' World
2. The Constructive Contributions of P.M. for the Church
3. The Destructive Capabilities of P.M. for the Church; and
4. The Restrictive but Adequate Nature of the Church's Map and Compass

Let's begin by trying to understand something about the condition of our Postmodern world.

I believe that it's very important for us to distinguish between two very different senses of what it means to say that we live in a "Postmodern" world. First, there is a "Cultural" sense of Postmodernism; and secondly, there is a "Philosophical" sense of Postmodernism.

As an overview in understanding what "cultural" Postmodernism is, we can think about three basic cultural orientations: the "pre-modern," the "modern," and the "postmodern."

Although we can roughly talk about the "modern" orientation starting with the rise of modern science in the 17th century and the "postmodern" culture starting in the mid-part of the 20th century, ALL three of these perceptions still exist in the world. The culturally "Modern" did not eliminate the culturally "pre-modern"; and the culturally "Postmodern" has not eliminated the "modern." (I sometimes hear people talking about our Postmodern world with the implication that everything and everyone is Postmodern; and that's simply not the case.)

Nevertheless, at least in the Western world, the Modern has dominated the Pre-modern, and now the Post-modern is dominating the other two.

The **PRE-MODERN** world is characterized by a

- manual economy
- it has little diversity or social change
- It submits more easily to religious or social authorities; and
- It is pre-scientific in its approach to life.

The culturally **Modern** world primarily has:

- an Industrial and machine economy.
- It is primarily Western in its orientation
- It prides itself on rational consensus & conformity; and
- It is Word-based & Linear.

The culturally **Postmodern** world primarily has a:

- Service economy.
- It is Electronic in its economy and in its dissemination of knowledge.
- It is Global (Non-Western).
- It is highly Diverse in its perspectives. And
- It is Image-based & Random.

If I were to select two objects that respectively represent Cultural Modernism and Postmodern, I would say that Modernism is illustrated by a typewriter, and Postmodernism is illustrated by an Internet-connected computer. You've got to pound away one letter at a time in proper sequence on a typewriter using the written materials in your possession. But with an Internet-

connected computer, you have instant editing access to any file; you can easily “cut and paste” material in a variety of ways; and you can literally access and use images and ideas from around the globe.

There is no question that all of us live, as a matter of fact, in Postmodern culture, even if we are cultural Modernists in our personal lives.

I would say, then, that it is undeniable that we live in a Postmodern culture. But this is very different from saying that we are, or that we should be, Postmodernists in the philosophical sense. Philosophical Postmodernism, although it has different varieties, is very different from cultural Postmodernism.

Philosophical Postmodernism is just a part of our Postmodern culture. It makes much more significant claims about the nature of reality, knowledge, and truth. While it has some valuable insights that I will mention, I believe that it also has a very destructive capacity for the presentation and defense of Christian truth.

One interesting way to illustrate the philosophical differences at work here was offered by Walter Truett Anderson in his book, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*. Anderson used a brief story of three umpires.

- The pre-modern umpire says, “There are strikes and there are balls, and I call ‘em as they are.” The pre-Modernist has a more uncritical sense that what he says corresponds to a reality that he sees with complete objectivity.
- The Modernist umpire says “... I call ‘em the way I see ‘em.” Although he thinks that what he calls is “true,” he gives priority of the “Self” as a knowing subject, not the external world.
- The Postmodernist ump says, “They ain’t nothing until I call ‘em.” In this case, the philosophical Postmodern ump claims that what really matters is not reality “out there,” but his perception of reality. What he says is reality.

These basic differences are associated with a number of philosophical contrasts between Modernism and Postmodernism. For example, Modernism holds that there is an Absolute Truth that can be known by rational beings; and Postmodernism denies the existence of Truth that applies to everyone. Instead, every community has its own standards for truth, and those standards are generally what works best for that community.

In terms of cartography, another way of illustrating the philosophical differences is to say that the Modernists believe that they have the right “reading” on reality and that everybody’s compass is pointing in the same direction.

On the other hand, the Postmodernists feel that every group of people has a different compass, and the needles on those instruments are pointing in different directions. There is NO “truth North” for the Postmodernist. There is no “universal compass” that can guide everyone’s path.

In light of this brief analysis, many of you may understandably wonder how Postmodernism could be of any possible value to the church and to the Christian faith. However, I believe that the church should recognize a number of constructive contributions from Postmodernism.

In the first place, the church today must acknowledge and adapt to the cultural Postmodernism that dominates the world for most of us. The changes that have occurred even in the last 20 years have been enormous.

Some Christian writers have tried to challenge the church toward necessary and appropriate changes in our Postmodern world.

Chuck Smith boldly announced that Postmodernism has signaled *The End of the World as We Know It*. And it offers “clear direction for bold and innovative ministry in a Postmodern world.

Robert Webber has attempted to get us to “rethink” our evangelical faith and life in our Postmodern world.

***Ancient-Future Faith:
Rethinking Evangelicalism for a
Postmodern World***
(1999)

And D.A. Carson and others have discussed what it means to proclaim and defend “the truth” to those who are Postmodern.

The demonstrated need for us to become more evangelistically and apologetically effective in our Postmodern world is statistically staggering. While many bible-believing churches seem to be growing significantly, the fact is that the number of “unchurched” adults is growing at an alarming rate.

Recent research by the Barna Research Group indicates that in 1991, there were 39 millions American adults who were “unchurched”—meaning that they had attended a church service no more than two or three times for special services within the previous year. Today, the number of “unchurched” in America is 75 million. That’s a 92% increase in unchurched adults in that time, and the population increase has only been 15%. Clearly, the church must give much greater attention to attracting the unchurched in our Postmodern culture.

One important strategy to help us connect with our Postmodern world is to stay informed on what perspectives and preferences of coming generations. A number of excellent books can provide numerous insights. Some of these include Strauss and Howe’s *Generations: The History of America’s Future* and their *Millennials Rising*.

Various sources help us understand the “Boomers,” the “X’ers,” and 13th Gen.

The fact is that the leaders in many of our churches are “Generations Apart” from those who are especially Postmodern in their outlook.

But it’s not just a generational thing. Every generation has had a “generation gap” with its successor. Yet the differences between a “Modern” culture and a “Postmodern” culture are even more significant than mere generational differences.

How is the church responding to this? Two extreme approaches are vividly illustrated by one of America’s most theological insightful families. Take a look.

[SIMPSON CLIP: “BORING ...”]

[SIMPSON CLIP: COMMERCIALIZING CHURCH]

[PHOTO FROM SIMPSON CLIP]: Some are putting their people to sleep, and others are catering to a Postmodern world a little too much!

My sense is that very few churches have made a consciously and intentionally analyze our Postmodern culture to determine what they should be doing differently to communicate to it.

Rich Knopp, “Apologetic Cartography”

As a quick test, let me ask those of you who are church leaders: what has your church done specifically to evaluate our culture so that you can be more responsive to, and effective with, Postmoderns? What considerations have you given to these things because of your awareness of our Postmodern culture?

It is critically important for us to recall our kingdom mission: God has not called us simply to cast a line in our little harbor. He has not called us to drop anchor in the safety of our cherished shores. Most fish don't know where we are in the first place.

If all we want to do is keep our own little school of fish, then I suppose it makes sense to do nothing different.

But God has called us to cast our nets to the nations, and that's not just referring to China, India, Indonesia, and Africa. He has called the church to set sail into the diversity of all the seas, lakes, and rivers. He has called us to be "fishers of men" in the oceans of a Postmodern world.

So far, I have claimed that our Postmodern culture has brought a number of positive values that can and should be utilized by the church. But some of the philosophy of Postmodernism is also of considerable value to the church.

The church and her leaders have often adopted principles and practices that are more "Modernist" than biblical. The Modernist emphases on individualism, rationalism, factualism, and objectivism have prompted many in the church to extend these qualities beyond their philosophical and theological merit.

Some have seen their church as exclusively right. They have been too far-reaching in what they think they can rationally explain. They have persistently presented a Christian apologetic that naively appeals to purported "facts." And they have confidently rested on the laurels of their interpretation of Christian truth.

[PHILOSOPHICAL POSTMODERNISM AND OUR FAITH]

Philosophical Postmodernism can help us rightly understand that our faith is not ALL rational; it is not just a bunch of "facts"; it cannot be so simplistically "proven"; it is not exhausted in a book; and it is often held with an array of biases that are not all theologically justified.

Curtis and Eldredge rightly criticize much of what passes for our Christianity in practice: "We have lived so long with a 'propositional' approach to Christianity, we have nearly lost its true meaning Our rationalistic approach to life . . . is barely more than mere fact-telling. Modern evangelicalism reads like an IRS 1040 form: it's true, all the data is there, but it doesn't take your breath away" (*The Sacred Romance*, pp. 44-45).

The church somehow needs to learn how to "take the breath away" from our culture. And as strange as it may sound, Postmodernism, in its philosophical sense, can help us in this endeavor.

But there are also some **very destructive capabilities** of Postmodernism for the church.

Philosophical Postmodernism, in its stronger forms, denies any absolute truth and contends that "truth" is whatever the community says it is. It rejects any universal sense of reason, it denies our knowledge of the "real" world, and by consequence, it rejects moral absolutes.

Yet surprising as it may seem, a number of church leaders and Christian scholars are crossing a fuzzy boundary into a potentially destructive region of Postmodernism.

Some evangelical scholars are trying to caution us against excessive excursions into Postmodernism. Millard Erickson of Baylor University surveys some of the evangelical responses to Postmodernism,

And he tries to get us to see both the "promise" as well as the "perils" of Postmodernism.

Douglas Groothuis, professor at Denver Seminary, rightly senses that there is “truth decay” occurring, not only in our culture but in our Christian scholarship and churches.

The concerns registered by these and others seems justified when we encounter statements like this one from Stanley Fish, one of the Postmodern champions, who says that his Postmodern approach “relieves me of the obligation to be right ... and demands only that I be interesting.”

Perhaps one of the worst indictments that could be directed to a preacher or Christian teacher is that they only want to be “interesting” and that they are not so concerned about being “right.”

Postmodernism is having a detrimental effect on some of our churches, and it is having a damaging influence on how we defend our faith.

Increasingly, I sense that some are renouncing Truth for mere trust;

Relinquishing reasons for relevance; and

Rejecting logic for love.

For example, Alister McGrath, one of the most prolific evangelical authors, says:

“We ... need to realize that it is now bad tactics to major on the truth question. If we’re going to get a hearing in today’s culture, we need to be able to show that Christianity has something relevant and attractive to offer” (*Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, p. 103).

I have no qualm with McGrath’s appeal for relevance and attractiveness. But when Christian leaders begin minimizing or eliminating the “truth question,” we are in danger of losing a functional compass that can provide direction to our Postmodern world.

I concur with Groothuis’s point that “our operative term ought to be engagement, not relevance.”

Fortunately, we have come far enough that the excessive pendulum swing toward Postmodernism is being acknowledged.

Last year at the North American, Thom Rainer, dean of the Billy Graham school of Missions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was interviewed by the Church Development Fund. Rainer shared some of his “surprising insights” that his research group has uncovered from the “unchurched.”

Listen to what he said when he was asked about why so many church leaders have watered down their theology and their appeal to truth.

[video of Thom Rainer interview, used with permission from the Church Development Fund]

William Lane Craig, one of the leading Christian apologists of our day, also wants to warn us against allowing Postmodernism to deactivate the very tools that are still critically important to offer God’s direction to our Postmodern culture.

[video clip of Craig’s interview with Dr. Rich Knopp at WorldViewEyes]

Postmodernism is properly helping us see that our faith is “relational,” “experiential,” and “personal.”

But it is dangerously moving us away from retaining the biblical and historically-established view that our faith is also rational, empirical, and propositional.

I am grateful for the impetus that Postmodernism has brought in forcing the church and Christian apologists to highlight the relational aspects of our faith. But these facets of our faith should not be seen as unique contributions of Postmodernism.

In fact, I would put the point this way:

“If you are accentuating community and creatively cultivating relationships of trust, and if you are pursuing love as your final apologetic—passionately pursue these under the banner of the Bible and the cross of Christ, not under the pretext of Postmodernism.”

In other words, just because you are doing these things does not make you a Postmodernist, nor does it legitimate Postmodernism.

We didn't really need Postmodernism to get us to “broaden” our understanding and application of our faith. We should have gleaned this from scripture to begin with.

I believe that the church DOES have a map and a compass that is adequate in our Postmodern world.

As we reflect on our current Postmodern condition, I would urge us to recognize that:

- We desperately need a map and a compass.
- God has provided an adequate map & compass.
- But we shouldn't exaggerate the precision of our interpretation of that map and compass.

As I mentioned earlier, our fundamental Christian task of proclamation and apologetics involves helping others:

- Locate where they are.
- Identify where they need to go, and
- Receive adequate guidance on how to get there.

The problem with our Postmodern world is that its map is mixed up, and its compass is confused.

The church and her Christian apologists must NOT merely accept the navigational tools of our Postmodern world. They won't work—at least when it comes to leading someone to the Truth of God. It may attract them; it may make them “feel” better; it may give them a sense of “belonging” to a meaningful community. But the navigational instruments of Postmodernism are misguided and fundamentally mistaken.

Our Postmodern world urgently needs a map and a compass that Christian revelation alone can adequately provide.

If anytime in history, this is NOT the time for the church and for Christian apologists to abandon their charge to be “the pillar and the support of the truth.” Nor is it the time to minimize the idea that there IS a distinct “way,” “truth,” and “life.”

Yet while some things about Postmodernism are unacceptable to a biblical Christian, we must not retreat to Pre-Modernism as though we can ignore the culture and the predominant mentality of our day, and we must not retrench into Modernism by exaggerating the capabilities of our human reason or by simplistically equating our specific interpretations of reality with “absolute truth.”

What our culture needs—and what the churches need to provide—is what I would call a “Constructive Christian Postmodernism”—a Postmodernism that allows the compass of scripture to stand in judgment on both Modernism and Postmodernism.

[QUOTATION ON AVOIDING MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM.] “The church today must avoid the arrogant overconfidence of rationalistic Modernism, and it must also refuse the impotence of relativistic Postmodernism.”

This kind of “Constructive Christian Postmodernism” will affirm that the map and the compass of God’s revelation are “adequate” to our God-given mission. But it will not claim that the map and compass exhaust all truth or that they achieve “absolute” levels of precision.

Today, our “Modernist” world has given us technological marvels like a GPS device (a ground positioning system). The one I’m holding right now can give my position on the earth within about 9 feet.

You only need three reference points and synchronized time to make the calculations. More sophisticated differential GPS instruments have an accuracy within millimeters. These systems can put detailed maps in the palm of our hand.

These systems can put detailed maps in the palm of our hand.

[NAPKIN PICTURE] And yet I am often amazed at how a simple map, sometimes drawn on the back of a luncheon napkin can still get somebody where they need to go.

God has given us a sufficient map and compass. And He’s also given every one of us the responsibility to start drawing some maps for someone else who needs it. If you have a good understanding of God’s map and His compass, even you inaccurate, imprecise attempts at cartography could make a difference in someone’s life.

Though the sky has appeared differently throughout history, and though the star configurations appear differently to those around the globe, God’s creation of our Milky Way reminds us every day that there IS an adequate reference point.

Everything revolves around Polaris, the North Star.

In fact, God has provided us with a “Spiritual Triangulation” to give us adequate reference points.

Let’s be effective cartographers for the cause of Christ in a world that desperately needs a spiritual North Star.