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Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church

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James K.A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006)

Reviewed by Gregory P. Veltman

Recently, a few of my colleagues asked me to describe postmodernism. Attempting this was somewhat risky business. The task was like grabbing a handful of sand; it is not easily grasped because some amount seems to always escape between one's fingers. My colleagues had heard the term thrown around, but had rarely spoken about it in depth or in any coherent manner.

Unfortunately, postmodernism has become a sort of catch-all word in higher education, which oftentimes confuses more than clarifies. Its meaning can range from the philosophical, as in "there are no absolute truths," to the cultural, referring to the current generation's penchant for images and story in the learning process. It is commonly understood to be an attack on the validity of the Christian faith. Maybe it is something to be feared. In a gentle and intelligent way, James Smith defines key phrases associated with postmodernism and shows how, rightly understood, they may actually help Christians navigate our current times within the community of the Church. Smith's goal with this book is to introduce college students and the philosophically uninitiated to the origins and the shaping influences of the current theories and discourse in academia.

Smith's gift in this book is to clearly and concisely summarize the major thoughts of three heavy duty French thinkers (Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault) which have paved the way for our cultural entrance into a postmodern era. He not only opens up the readers to these ideas but also illuminates how they might apply these ideas to their Christian faith and life. A Christian approach to the emerging postmodern culture is an important topic for college students as well as for those working in academia. The academic context is a key arena for discussion of postmodernism and its consequences and allows student affairs professionals to mentor students in exploring how Christians can live *in* the world but not *of* it. Becoming clear on the ideas and issues of postmodernity will equip Christians to step into their callings within society. College and university campuses are where students develop the habits of engage and live in society. Smith's book is a helpful tool in understanding the worldview of postmodern culture as well as the tools for developing a robust Christian faith and practice.

Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? came out of a series of lectures that Smith gave at L'Abri, a study center in Switzerland for college age students started by theologian and cultural critic Francis Schaeffer. This book is the first in *The Church and Postmodern Culture* series (edited by Smith and published by Baker Academic) surrounding issues arising out of two new theological movements: the Emergent Church and Radical Orthodoxy. With this confluence of the church and contemporary culture as a guiding influence, Smith weaves together film examples, philosophy and spiritual disciplines in an effort to allay fears that postmodernism is an affront to the gospel.

Smith begins with Jacques Derrida famous phrase “There is nothing outside the text” and explains how it is commonly understood to mean that knowing is only possible through very subjective interpretations of the world, and that all truth is relative to one’s interpretation. Smith points out that this phrase is more comparable to the situation that Lenny, of the film *Memento*, finds himself. Because of an injury that does not allow him to store anything new to memory, Lenny must rely on the words he has written down to lead him toward finding his wife’s killer. His faith in the text becomes more and more suspect as he realizes that the text can be manipulated by others. Smith then goes on to relate this new insight to the use of Scripture as the primary text for life as a Christian. Smith argues that we need a textual community; the church should be a gathering place for Christians to come to know the text that informs their practice. By being a part of this community, Christians can be prophetic in the culture by pointing out that the Christian interpretation of the world, through the lens of the text, accurately describes reality and deconstructs the predominant idols of our culture, like consumerism and hedonism. Understanding that knowing is an interpretive process does not by default make truth relative, rather we come to understand our faith as a lens through which we see the world. Although it is like looking through a glass darkly, someday we shall see face to face.

The second common phrase of postmodernity is Jean-Francois Lyotard’s assessment of the postmodern condition as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” Commonly understood, this phrase takes the shape of doubt toward an over-arching story that explains and gives meaning to our lives. Since Christianity is usually considered to be a metanarrative, a story about the way the world is and the way it ought to be, any incredulity (disbelief or skepticism) toward the Christian faith looks like a rejection of Christianity. What is usually misunderstood in this view is that Lyotard is claiming that the postmodern condition has exposed the fact that it is belief systems that undergirds any type of theory that explains reality (modernism claims that there are objective foundations that legitimate these theories as true). Lyotard’s intent in the context that surrounds this quote is to point out that positivistic science is losing its followers as a guiding worldview. The postmodern condition is the movement away from propositional and foundational truth, toward a view of truth that is a convergence of beliefs and our everyday experience. Modernist Christianity usually comes across as a list of propositions. Smith argues that the postmodern condition allows the church and its members to describe the Christian faith as a rich and dynamic story that applies to our lives and becomes evident in our practices. Christianity, in this view, becomes a persuasive lived narrative, rather than a belief that is held in the abstract and applied legalistically.

Finally, Smith shows how we might approach the “Power is Knowledge” philosophy of Michel Foucault. This section is the hardest part of the book. Not only is Foucault hard to summarize, but Smith also wants to be careful to let readers know that there are currently debates as to what is the best interpretation of Foucault’s work. Foucault’s theory of power, knowledge, and discipline is characterized by “protesting control and resisting systems by documenting their covert domination in modern culture” (p.84). In other words, the structures of society work to make individuals its followers by disciplining them in a certain way—to the benefit of the societal structure. The power that social institutions use to order processes, systems, and people comes to shape the participants, which for Foucault means that the flaws in the social structure become imposed on the participants of the institution. Foucault’s theory reminds me of King David’s critique of idol worship in Psalm 115 in which the worshipers become like the idols they bow before. What is most important to Foucault is the individual’s ability to resist this power, which is seen as coercive and manipulative. Smith concedes that the use of power by individuals and social institutions cannot be avoided, but that it is not inherently negative, like Foucault implies. Instead he argues that power can be useful within a loving community. Smith points out that the church is the institution that should use its power to disciple its members because the image that its members should be conformed to is that of Christ. With Christ as the head, the rightful authority, the body will become what it is meant to be. The church offers Christians a counter formational ethic shaped by the gospel that sets them apart as a prophetic and persuasive witness to the dominant culture.

Smith concludes the book with an appeal for the emerging postmodern church to connect with its roots. Churches that are most interested in connecting to contemporary culture can slide into the problem of accommodating the gospel to the culture. Smith argues that this accommodation can, and should, be avoided by understanding how our times are situated in relationship to a long and deep tradition of Christian thought that can contribute to the current conversation. If we do indeed live on the precipice of postmodern culture, then we will need to be bold in understanding the ideas that shape that culture as well as what the Bible can tell us about how to live faithfully in what seems like a culture in flux.

As students enter college, they are quickly dropped into the waters of postmodernism uninitiated. Smith offers students and their mentors a guide to understanding the times we are living in and knowing what to do in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the cacophony of ideas in a postmodern culture. By initiating students into the conversation of understanding their faith as it relates to culture, they can be developed into wise and faithful followers of the ancient faith that helps them navigate their lives today and tomorrow.