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The Fall of Athens and the Challenge of Postmodernity

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The Athenians achieved a higher level of culture than their countrymen. Athens became the literary and artistic center of Greece. Yet, “the ‘great age’ of Athens lasted less than fifty years.” Why? Who brought an end to this mother of arts and invention? “It was the Sophists who popularized Protagoras’s phrase Man is the measure of all things and translated it to mean that individuals are not responsible to any transcendent moral authority for their actions.”¹

The Sophists were not concerned with “reaching the truth. Some even denied that there was any truth at all. They said that all knowledge is relative, and that things are correct or incorrect only as people consider them so. So many voices were the problem. Each person’s view had equal value at the table. There was no certain authoritative voice—no voice of God, no accepted standard by which to judge the plurality of voices. The Sophists also claimed that there are no absolute standards of morality. They declared that the will of those in power determines what people consider right or wrong.”²

As Russell Kirk observed, “It was the clear relativism of the Sophists, not the mystical insights of Plato, nor Aristotle’s aspiration after the Supreme God, which dominated the thinking of the classical Greeks in their decadence. The failure of the Greeks to find an enduring popular religious sanction for their order of civilization had been a main cause of the collapse of the world of the

¹Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil: Restoring the Soul in a Disintegrating Culture*, (Dallas: Word, 1996), 37-38.

²*The World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1973), 15:351.

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polis.”³ No ancient Greek philosopher defended Protagorean relativity. Socrates and Plato taught that truth was absolute.⁴

The Sophists opposed religion and promoted relativism. Ravi Zacharias warns, “In our time, the gods of relativism who shape our ideas may well be in the same mold and worthy of abandonment if we are to avert the debacle that overtook the Greek soul.”⁵ I believe the problem today is even more disturbing. For the Sophists promoted relativism from outside, but now relativism thrives within Christianity itself, and even in the Adventist church.

Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) must burn deep within every Seventh-day Adventist conscience. Do we know the truth? We are told that, “None but those who have fortified their minds with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict.”⁶ We are told that the coming sealing work of the Latter Rain Holy Spirit is a “settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved . . .”⁷ Those sealed will be those who hear the voice of God above the multiplied voices of mankind.

The Fall of Babylon:

Loss of the Reformation Biblical Principle of *Sola Scriptura*

We live in the time of the fall of Babylon. Scripture speaks of end-time error as Babylon. The term Babylon reminds one of the tower of Babel, where confusion came through multiplied voices as foreign languages. Modern Babylon is confusion due to multiplied human ideas about divine truth. This is why Babylon is fallen (Rev 14:8; 18:2-3). Scripture never calls people to relativism, to pluralism, or to secularism. It calls people to Christ (Matt 11:28), the One who is the Truth (John 14:6), and it therefore calls people out of Babylon, as seen in the final end-time invitation, “Come out of her my people” (Rev 18:4).

It was the Babylonian-like confusion over truth that led to the demise of Athens, and it is this same confusion over truth that is leading to the rapid collapse of much of Christendom. Scripture warns, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings” (Heb 13:9), for “The Spirit clearly says that in the latter times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Tim 4:1). Babylon is confusion because conflicting human voices drown out the voice of God. Allowing the Bible to interpret itself is dragged in the dust as human interpreters scramble to push their views at the table.

³Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order*, 93-94.

⁴Kathryn R. Ludwigson in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Wheaton, IL, Victor, 1995), 289-290.

⁵Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 40.

⁶Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950) 593-594.

⁷Ellen G. White, MS 173, 1902, *S.D.A. Bible Commentary*, (Takoma Park: Washington D.C., 1955), 4:1161.

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The Catholic church believes the canon of Scripture is the product of the church, rather than the church being the product of the Biblical canon.⁸ This positions the church above Scripture. This is why the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) stated, “For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.”⁹

This has been the consistent teaching of the Catholic church throughout its history. This sitting in judgment on Scripture is the basis of all the false doctrines espoused by Roman Catholicism. The Reformers revolted against this error with the cry *sola Scriptura* (*scriptura sui ipsius intepres; scripturam ex scriptura explicandam esse*). This means that the Bible is capable of interpreting itself and does not need tradition, philosophy, church, or any other human experience to interpret it. It is the *sole* interpreter of itself. The word *sole* is vital. It is the erosion of this word *sole* that has led to pluralism and relativism and that constitutes the fall of Babylon. For today, the landscape is literally crawling with outside or external interpreters, all claiming to be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture.

The battle today is between the internal interpretive role of Scripture versus the external interpreters who reject Scripture’s self-interpretive role. Experience, reason, and tradition are not the interpreters of Scripture. Neither do they share the interpretive role with the Bible’s self-interpretation (though we would be naïve to claim we no not use them as tools or aids as we search for Scripture’s self-interpretation).¹⁰ Seventh-day Adventists must be clear that Scripture is not just the primary interpreter, but the only interpreter. The Bible is not the first among equals in this task. The written Word of God does not share its interpretive role with other contenders anymore than the Living Word of God shares His salvation mission with others. Just as there is only one Saviour, there is only one method of Scripture interpretation. The fall of Babylon resulted from failure to hold to this Reformation Scripture principle of *sola Scriptura*.

This failure was dramatically demonstrated on March 29, 1994, when thirteen persons,¹¹ Catholic and Evangelicals, issued a Document entitled “Evan-

⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1994), 34 (2.4.120).

⁹*The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 121 (2.3.12).

¹⁰By reason in this admission I do not mean rationalism or rationalization, but careful thought. By experience I do not allow for experience as an authority over Scripture but only that which confirms its doctrinal infallibility. By tradition I mean only that those who go before us have had insights worth our consideration. “Private interpretation” also leads to interpretive error.

¹¹Charles Colson (Prison Fellowship), Juan Diaz-Villar, S.J. (Catholic Hispanic Ministries), Avery Dulles, S.J. (Fordham University), Bishop Francis George (Diocese of Yakima, Washington), Kent Hill (Eastern Nazarene College), Jesse Miranda (Assemblies of God), Msgr. William Murphy (Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Boston), (Richard John Neuhaus (Institute on Religion and Public Life), Brian O’Connell (World Evangelical Fellowship), Herbert Schlossberg, Archbishop Francis Stafford (Archdiocese of Denver), George Weigel (Ethics and Public Policy Center) and John White (Geneva College and the National Association of Evangelicals).

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gelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the 3rd Millennium.” It was endorsed by twenty-five well known Catholic and Evangelical leaders.¹² The document caused a furor in Catholic and Evangelical circles. Dave Hunt wrote, “The document in effect, overturned the Reformation and will unquestionably have far reaching repercussions throughout the Christian world for years to come.”¹³

One of the key differences between Catholic and Evangelical theology has to do with justification by faith alone through Christ alone. Martin Luther discovered in Romans that, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17). This was the heart of the Reformation. It was against the Catholic notion that justification is through faith plus works. Any human works detract from the one saving work of Jesus Christ. “The doctrine of Justification,” wrote John Calvin, “is the principal ground on which religion must be supported.”¹⁴

R. C. Sproul’s book, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, calls in question the document on Catholic and Evangelical unity. He rightly points out that justification by faith is understood differently by Catholics and Evangelicals. Even the Council of Trent taught justification by faith. But it was not *only* by faith. That was the key issue of the Reformation. “The word *alone* was a solecism on which the entire Reformation doctrine of justification was erected. The absence of the word *alone* from *ECT’s* joint affirmation is most distressing.”¹⁵

The key word “alone” is missing throughout Catholic thinking. Evangelicals believe the gospel is justification through faith *alone* by Christ *alone* found in Scripture *alone*. By contrast, Catholics see faith as a human work, so there is no faith alone, Christ alone, nor Scripture alone. Human penance is added to justification and to Christ’s work, and the tradition of the Magisterium is added to Scripture. It is the human additions to the work of Christ in salvation and revelation that denies the free gift of the gospel.

¹²William Abraham (Perkins School of Theology), Elizabeth Achtemeier (Union Theological Seminary—Virginia), William Bently Ball (Harrisburg Pennsylvania), Bill Bright (Campus Crusade for Christ), Robert Destro (Catholic University of America), Augustine DiNoia, O.P. (Dominican House of Studies), Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, S.J. (Fordham University), Keith Fournier (American Center for Law and Justice), Bishop William Frey (Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry), Mary Ann Gledon (Harvard Law School), Os. Guinness (Trinity Forum), Nathan Hatch (University of Notre Dame), James Hitchcock (St. Louis University), Peter Kreeft (Boston College), Matthew Lamb (Boston College), Ralph Martin (Renewal Ministries), Richard Mouw (Fuller Theological Seminary), Mark Noll (Wheaton College), Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute), Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor (Archdiocese of New York), Thomas Oden (Drew University), J.I. Packer (Regent College, British Columbia), Pat Robertson (Regent College), John Rodgers (Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry) and Bishop Carlos A. Sevilla, S.J. (Archdiocese of San Francisco).

¹³Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994), 5.

¹⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (London: James Clarke, 1962), 2:37 (3.11.1).

¹⁵R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 36.

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Any placing of human experience, reason, or tradition as interpretive tools above Scripture's self-interpretation rejects the important distinction between Catholic thinking and that of the Reformers. Any Seventh-day Adventist who places these "outside authorities" above or equal to Scriptural authority¹⁶ have a Catholic view of Scripture, not a Protestant view, whether they know it or not.

John MacArthur said, "Despite all the recent dialogue among those desiring to reunite Rome and Protestantism, there has been no suggestion that Rome will ever repudiate its stance against justification by faith. For that reason, I believe the trend toward tolerance and cooperation is a destructive one because it blurs the distinction between biblical truth and a system of falsehood."¹⁷

The Fall of John Hick: Case-Study: "From *Sola Scriptura* to Pluralism"

We have noted the fall of Athens and the fall of Babylon. We have seen how Protestants joined with Catholics in the ECT document, oblivious to their violation of the *sola Scriptura* biblical principle. In fact, the Ecumenical Movement is replete with examples of Evangelicals and Catholics uniting over a social agenda while ignoring their differences in biblical interpretation. To them culture and values are more important than truth.

We come now to see the fall of one man who is representative of so many Bible believing youth who went off to seminaries and universities and lost their way. It is a story that, in various degrees, has happened and is happening to some Seventh-day Adventists. It is a story of one conservative who gave up the *sola Scriptura* principle and plunged into pluralism with its deafening voices and its dark, dismal, dangerous outlook.

In the recent book *More Than One Way?*¹⁸ John Hick speaks of his journey away from a conservative Christian thought-world to a liberal worldview. Like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Rudolph Bultmann before him, Hick questioned the biblical documents because he was driven by a desire "to preach the gospel in a way that made sense to ordinary twentieth-century men and women, both young and old."¹⁹ He speaks of the evangelical package that he once accepted. It included "verbal inspiration of the Bible; Creation and Fall; Jesus as God the Son incarnate, born of a virgin, conscious of his divine nature, and performing miracles of divine power; redemption by his blood from sin and guilt; Jesus' bodily resurrection, ascension, and future return in glory; heaven and hell."²⁰

¹⁶Vatican II states that "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God." (2.2.10). Yet it clearly concludes, "For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church." (2.3.12). *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M Abbott, S.J., (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 117, 121.

¹⁷John MacArthur, quoted by Davis Duggins, *Moody Monthly*, Nov. 1993, 15.

¹⁸Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹⁹Hick, 33.

²⁰*Ibid*, 30.

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Most of these are biblical doctrines. Yet, Hick says this package for him “has long since crumbled and disappeared.”²¹ Thus, for Hick, Jesus is not unique in the process of salvation/liberation/enlightenment. Nor is the function of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus known.

Basic to this jettisoning of biblical doctrines is Hick’s rejection of propositional revelation. He said, “I do not believe that God reveals propositions to us, whether in Hebrew, Greek, English, or any other language.”²² This dismissal is itself a proposition, yet a proposition that Hick never evaluates. He never attempts to see if it is true. As Ronald Nash rightly says, “it apparently never occurred to Hick to examine critically the faulty presuppositions that led him to deny even the possibility of divinely revealed truth.”²³ Rather than do that, Hick turns away from particular revelation in Scripture to God’s alleged revelation in all world faiths. In doing this He rejects the unique work of the Holy Spirit in biblical revelation and so jettisons *sola Scriptura*.

The early Hick called this a Copernican revolution. He claimed that the Ptolemaic worldview of Christianity was exclusivistic, where salvation is thought to be impossible beyond God’s revelation in Scripture or outside the church. Hick claimed that salvation is possible in every religion. All religions are “revelations of God’s activity.”²⁴ Hick replaced the centrality of Christ by an all-loving God who works through all religions to save mankind. The problem with this idea is its focus on a personal being, whereas many religions believe in an impersonal god (e.g. Pantheism and Mysticism).

Beyond that, if the same God works through all religions, why are their doctrines so divergent and contradictory? For example, as far as salvation is concerned, how can God be at work through all religions when salvation is a gift in Evangelical Christianity but has to be earned in non-Christian religions? How can it be the same God working in all when this life is the only time for accepting salvation in Evangelical Christianity, but is only one of many life-times for earning salvation in the reincarnational *samsara* of Hinduism and Buddhism? Here are two concurrent soteriologies that speak more about a schizophrenic God than about a God of love, who as such must necessarily treat everyone alike. One is tempted to think that Hick has rejected all propositions in non-Christian religions as well as in Scripture. At best his position demonstrates a meaningless pluralism.

By contrast, Muslims really believe in their propositions. Journeys to Mecca are sought on the basis of propositions about its benefits. Reincarnation is a propositional view found in a number of Eastern religions. Becoming a god, or enlightenment, is a propositional belief in Eastern mysticism. Even Hick’s theory

²¹Ibid, 33.

²²Ibid, 36.

²³Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 15.

²⁴Gavin D’Costa, *John Hick’s Theology of Religions: A Critical Evaluation* (New York: U P of America, 1987), 21.

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about pluralism is given in propositions throughout his writings. He uses the very method he denies. He reminds me of Karl Barth, who denies propositional truths in Scripture and yet fills his thirteen volumes with propositional truths from Scripture. It's true that Barth is considered more orthodox than Hick. Yet both are liberal, even if at different points along the liberal spectrum away from Scripture. Both share the common problem of rejecting biblical propositional truths and the importance of *sola Scriptura*.

It is important to recognize that the principle of non-contradiction necessitates that truth claims that differ cannot all be truth. How can religious beliefs that differ all come from the same source? Mutually incompatible truth claims concern the following: Is there one God or a plurality of ascended masters who were once human? Are humans fallen beings, having rebelled from God, or simply experiencing lower vibrational levels? Is salvation a restoration of a broken relationship between God and humankind or merely a revelation of knowledge that enlightens. Is God impersonal or is He a person revealed through Christ? Truth claims do matter. Nor can religions claim a dipolar view of religious truth, where the second pole transcends the logic of propositions. Zen Buddhism and Japanese Shintoism are examples of this kind of truth claims. Harold A. Netland, in his book *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, shows that this antipathy to the principle of non-contradiction is not limited to Eastern traditions, but is increasingly being found in the Christian community.²⁵ But that doesn't make it right. Religious truth claims cannot escape the principle of non-contradiction and still claim to be truth.

Hick opposes exclusivism in his thinking about God working beyond Christianity in all religions. But to get there he has been an exclusivist by truncating all biblical data that calls his theory in question. Paradoxically he apparently overlooks the exclusivist teaching found in the different religions. It is not just a problem of Christianity being exclusivist, but exclusivity is found in all. This is the very reason why there are so many different religions. I concur with Stephen T. Davis, who noted that, "some of the religions of the world are clearly exclusivist."²⁶ The very fact of the multiplicity of religions proves the relevance of unique propositional ideas found in all, and should have given Hick pause when rejecting the propositional truths found in Christianity.

Although in his later thought Hick's god became an unknown god, at least Hick knew enough to say he was unknown. To that extent He really was not unknown. Yet, even a belief in an unknown god is itself a propositional truth. Hick rejects biblical revelation and opts for an awareness of God as revelation.²⁷ He leaves the primary location for the Spirit's work and goes into a supposed

²⁵Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 142.

²⁶Stephen T. Davis, "Evangelicals and the Religions of the World," *The Reformed Journal*, 6/6 (June 1981): 9.

²⁷Hick, 33-34.

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universal revelation. He goes from a God who is known in biblical revelation to an unknown god in universal revelation. He ends up saying, "Should not the fruit of the Spirit, which according to Paul is 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 5:22-23), be more evident in Christian than in non-Christian lives? Yet it does not seem to me that in fact Christians are on average noticeably morally superior to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, or Buddhists."²⁸

Hick hopes that people "will open their minds to the glorious reality of God's presence throughout the entire world and recognize that different faith communities see and respond to different 'faces' of the infinite transcendent Reality."²⁹ This is based on his acceptance of Kant's view that God is never known as He is in Himself (*noumena*), but only as He is experienced (*phenomena*), so that each religion has an approximate knowledge of God. But anyone who opens their mind to these so called different "faces" is shocked by the incompatibility among them. In the end Hick not only jettisons the propositional self-revelation of God in Scripture, but jettisons any meaningful revelation of God and utterly fails to understand the function of the Holy Spirit to make God known through incarnation and inspiration.

We see then that the conservative John Hick, who had a reasonable faith based upon biblical propositions, gave them up and found himself floundering in a maze of meaningless contradictions. To this degree he mirrored the problem of postmodernity, to which we now turn.

Postmodernity

Today we're in the midst of a profound transition from modernity to postmodernity. The human race has entered a new era that presents unprecedented challenges and opportunities to Seventh-day Adventists' mission as we approach the third millennium. A number of non-SDA scholars have recognized these opportunities.³⁰

Many have attempted to describe postmodernity. "A massive intellectual revolution is taking place," says Diogenes Allen, "that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages. The foundations of the modern world are collapsing, and we are entering a postmodern world. The

²⁸Ibid, 41.

²⁹Ibid, 91.

³⁰Some include R. Albert Mohler, Jr. President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; Stanley J. Grenz, Pioneer MacDonald Professor of Baptist Heritage and Theology at Carey Hall/Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia; Dan R. Stiver, Associate Professor of Christian Philosophy, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; William E. Brown, President of Bryan College, Dayton, Tennessee; John A. Sims, Professor of Religion, Lee College, Cleveland Tennessee, and Thomas C. Oden, Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics, Theological School and Graduate School, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, 84, 101, 248, 321, 336, and 402, respectively.

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principles formed during the Enlightenment (c. 1600-1780), which formed the foundations of modern mentality, are crumbling.”³¹

“We are experiencing enormous structural change in our country and in the world,” says Leith Anderson, “—change that promises to be greater than the invention of the printing press, greater than the Industrial Revolution, and greater than the rise and demise of communism. Our world is changing so quickly that we can barely keep track of what is happening, much less figure out how to respond.”³²

Postmodernity Defined. We begin our definition with a simple fact: Postmodernity is *after* modernity. Modernity was launched by the 17th century Enlightenment, which dominated human quest for knowledge and understanding for two hundred years. Scientific method brought multiplied technological benefits to human living, but it also brought a negative impact on global ecology, as well as bringing the race to the brink of a nuclear holocaust. In this way belief in knowledge as good came to a shattering end. Thus, in the last half of the twentieth century the modern worldview was challenged and continues to be questioned.

Postmodernity is also *antimodernity*. The modern worldview included the acceptance of man’s inevitable progress, based on evolutionary theory. We have now come to a generation which, for the first time, does not see any future. The optimism of the Enlightenment, with its vaunted belief in human reason and evolution, has given way to pessimism and meaninglessness. It’s as if the world has suddenly awakened to a reality check. Whereas the modern worldview was influenced by scientific method, reason, and universal objectivity, postmodernity rejects scientific method, reason, and universal objectivity. The collapse of a unified, rational, and meaningful worldview has thrown the human race into a period of unprecedented pluralism and polyvalence where perspectival views dominate, with each person coming to reality from his or her own presuppositions and assumptions. There is no worldview to provide meaningful assessment of reality. “Defining the idea of postmodernism,” says Gary Phillips, “is a bit like nailing down Jell-O.”³³

Differences Between Modernity and Postmodernity. When it comes to comparing modernity and postmodernity, there’s some continuity between the two, but also a radical discontinuity. First to an example of continuity. The modern antipathy to metaphysics and the transcendental is continued in postmodernity. “While modernism categorically denies the transcendent and spends a great deal of time and effort attempting to prove that the transcendent does not exist,”

³¹Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 2.

³²Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1992), 17.

³³Gary Phillips, “Religious Pluralism in a Postmodern World,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: 1995), 254.

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says William E. Brown, "Postmodernism confronts the transcendent with a yawn."³⁴

In this confined context, postmodernity champions liberation causes. If there's no transcendent God, then humans are left to be revolutionaries, to bring change in their own strength, in their own way. There's a cause for the marginalized. Yet this is the time, as Carl F. H. Henry notes, when "religion is marginalized and trivialized,"³⁵ and "Postmodernists have genuinely given up on the idea of absolute truth."³⁶ What a paradox—they have an absolute mission or right (to liberate) without absolute mandate or truth, which leaves one wondering how even liberation can be an absolute truth for them!?

In modernity God was shut out of this part of His universe. This closed continuum worldview rejected any inbreaking of the Supernatural within the natural nexus of cause and effect on planet earth. Huston Smith suggests that the modern mind thought that "seeing further in a horizontal direction would compensate for loss of the vertical." But modernity failed to realize that vision on the horizontal plane is still confined within a closed universe, and therefore shut up to its own subjectivity. Smith illustrates this vision with a line silhouetting the Himalayan range. Modernity grabbed both ends and pulled it into a straight line.³⁷

Modernity flaunted human reason as the savior of all human problems. This extreme rationalism was not enlightened, although a product of the Enlightenment. Postmodernists rightly call in question this arrogance, but go too far by rejecting reason altogether.³⁸ The solution lies between the two extremes, where a proper use of reason under Scripture is necessary to arrive at solutions. For the God of all truth invited mankind, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa 1:18).

Difficulties in Postmodernity for the Presentation of Truth. My thesis is this: Postmoderns accept a number of voices (ideas) that are only theoretically relevant, but which cannot be sustained at the level of living. This makes postmoderns vulnerable to the certain voice of Truth. We will give examples of this fact as we proceed.

There are major difficulties for the presentation of biblical to postmodernity. To be relevant to this generation, one must give full attention to the challenges that postmodernity poses. The first thing to be stated is biblical truths need to be thought through for this generation, and not for a generation that has

³⁴William E. Brown, "Roots of Post-Modernism: Also Sprach Nietzsche," professional paper read to the Evangelical Theological Society, Southern Evangelical Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, March 10, 1995.

³⁵Carl F. H. Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, 41.

³⁶David S. Dockery, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, 14.

³⁷Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical, 1989), 6-7.

³⁸Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 68.

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gone. It's important to stress that biblical truths must be presented afresh for every generation. This does not change the content but may involve a change in communication techniques. We must understand postmoderns before we attempt to speak to them. The following characteristics give us insight to their thinking.

Opposed to System. How can one present a systematic understanding of biblical truth when such systems are irrelevant to Postmoderns? One must realize it's one thing to reject a system, and another thing to live a muddled life. Often the very ones rejecting systems organize their day, plan their vacations, and work in a routine manner, arriving at appointments on time. Modern life demands schedules, whether for travel, business, or the time to listen to the evening news. There's an inbuilt orderliness in air flights (sometimes), television programs, and publishing of *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, to name some.

Opposition to systems takes place only on the theoretical level, not where life is lived. Yet there's no advantage in rejecting something at the theoretical level which proves eminently workable at the level of living. Rejection of the strictures of modernity, the science that led to ecological and nuclear threats to the planet, are understandable and worthy; but there's more to modernity than that. There's a good side to modernity which lives on in postmodernity because life is more orderly than the theory of postmodernity allows.

Opposed to a Center. Postmodernism's rejection of a center in theory cannot be lived in practice. If God is not the center of a person's life, then someone or something else will be. Idolatry was a recurring problem throughout the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments deal with the problem up front. The very first commandment says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3). This was repeated in the Deuteronomy account (Deut 5:6-7).

Humans are incurably worshipers. This is true of postmoderns, as well. This is important to remember, because the end-time confrontation will involve worship, and all mankind will participate (Rev 13:3, 4, 12). The fact that humans are worshipers stems from their creation by God (Gen 1:26-31; 2:7, 20-25). They were made for God. If they do not worship God, they will worship some other god or gods. This is why religion is found in every culture, however primitive or advanced. Humans are programmed through creation to seek a center to their life, to give it meaning and security. Postmodernity has not decreased the number of football and baseball fans. Basketball still draws crowds, as does tennis, golf, and car racing. Hollywood stars are still sought after and praised on Oscar nights and between. Work is often central to those wanting to get ahead, whether professional or business. Workaholism didn't recede with the advent of postmodernity. The effects of creation and modernity still live on in spite of the de-centering theory of postmodernity.

Opposed to Any Worldview. There's no overarching worldview for postmodernity as there has been for all prior ages. Yet it's not possible to live up to

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this theoretical position. Postmodernity is a revolt and is expressed in many different ways. One way is through liberation theology. It's a quest for political power, influenced by Marxism. Liberation theology has a worldview. God is in the business of liberating marginalized people, and liberation is the center to this worldview. This is one example of how a movement within Postmodernity does have a worldview in practice.

Modernity had a center and a worldview. Postmodernity has neither. Yet, paradoxically, postmodernity finds itself in a shrinking world that thinks more in global terms, from economy to ecology. At the very time when order has been thrown to the winds, a global village has emerged. To this extent, in many areas of life, a worldview has been thrust upon the very revolution that abandoned all worldviews.

Relativism. With the rejection of any system, center, or worldview, the only option left to postmodernity was relativism. But relativism means that every individual has a right to his or her own view. Perspectival thinking replaced worldviews, the local situation replaced the broader context, situation ethics replaced the moral code, and personal preference replaced values. "If it feels good" replaced an objective norm. Theoretically each human is left to his or her own world. Order gives way to chaos, hope to nihilism, and the future to the ever present. There is no goal, purpose, or fulfillment. Humanity has become less than human. Thus, postmoderns have no protection from the eschatological and universal delusion of Spiritualism (Rev 16:12-16, 13:12-17).

Such dysfunctionality cannot sustain viable human existence. Postmoderns are desperate for meaning and a future. More than ever, they need to know the good news of the gospel. They are vulnerable to a certain voice. They need to hear the voice of God in Scripture.

Postmodern Theory Cannot Be Lived

We have been introduced to the fact that some postmodern theories cannot be lived. We now take a closer look at this fact. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Father of postmodernism, proclaimed God is dead and promoted Nihilism, or meaninglessness. Yet he discovered meaning in a social movement of his time and promoted it with gusto. He could not live his theory. The world of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) seemed meaningless, a world without morals. Yet he couldn't live up to this theory when he signed the Algerian Manifesto, "taking a position as though morals have real meaning."³⁹

A. J. Ayer suggested that only mathematico-logical truths and empirical truths are meaningful. All other statements that cannot be verified by sense data are "non-sense." Thus all biblical statements are meaningless. This immediately confined truth statements, or statements of meaning, to a very narrow slice of

³⁹Francis Schaefer, *The Complete Works of Francis Schaefer: A Christian Worldview* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 1:134.

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life. All other statements of poetry, music, religion, and art were renounced. But how can anyone live in such a narrowly prescribed world? Furthermore, the theory could not stand under its own test for a truth statement. For how can a theory of language that accepts only mathematico-logical and empirical statements be tested by that standard?

René Descartes (1596-1650), the Father of modernity, used the method of doubt. It was David Hume (1711-1776) who took this method to its ultimate, and it plunged him into utter skepticism. David K. Clark speaks of this effect. "Hume's philosophy left him completely in the dark about what to think, whom to trust, what cause to defend, or what activity to pursue. Given modern requirements, reason could not dispel his doubts. But he noticed that the company of friends put him in better spirits. So he turned to dining and backgammon to heal his epistemological depressions. His philosophy, however, proved utterly impotent to avoid skepticism."⁴⁰ Hume needed to get relief from his theory, for it could not be lived.

Jacques Derrida claims that "all interpretations are misinterpretations," and that a text has no clear meaning. But he jettisoned his theory once when he was misunderstood in a debate with John Searle. "Believing that Searle's exposition of his position had been unfair to him, Derrida could not resist saying, at several points in his reply, that Searle had misunderstood him and misstated his views, even adding at one point that what he, Derrida, had meant should have been clear enough and obvious to Searle. This was indeed a very far cry from Derrida's theory that a reader should not try to grasp the author's intent. Derrida thus abandons this position, just as others do, when he feels the need to replace a misstatement of his view with an adequate statement of it."⁴¹

Stanley Fish is "one of the most influential literary theorists"⁴² and "radical" reader-response theorists, focusing on meaning in the reading community rather than on the text.⁴³ Reader-response theory is an important part of the postmodern scene. Fish goes so far as to maintain that "the text as a formal entity does not exist apart from the reader's interpretive act."⁴⁴ In fact, reader-response theorists believe that readers are co-authors with the biblical writers, and they give to the text the meaning it should have. (Elsewhere I have critiqued

⁴⁰David K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35/4 (December 1993): 510.

⁴¹John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstructionism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1989), 13-14.

⁴²Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 474.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 515-516.

⁴⁴Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 378.

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Reader-Response theories in postmodern hermeneutics, noting their challenge to Evangelical theology).⁴⁵

How could life operate on Fish's theory? There could be no agreement on the American Constitution, or any other one, so citizens would interpret it as they choose. The very context of governance would be in jeopardy. Traffic signs would have no standard meaning, and driving would be hazardous. Some may choose to drive on the opposite side of the road, others agree that red traffic lights mean drive straight through, and stop signs mean you have the right of way. Contracts would be impossible, and business would be brought to a grinding halt, for the same wording would mean different things to different people.

If a text has no meaning in itself, but only in the mind of the reader, then no language would have meaning either, but only in the mind of the hearer. Life would simply break down on these terms, for no one could ever be sure that he or she could communicate. How could one order from Sears or Penney's over the phone? How could any TV station present the evening news? What purpose would weather reports have? What purpose would an emergency 911 call have? What meaning would a doctor's diagnosis have? What meaning would university teaching have? How could you grade exams if every answer is equally valid? The list is endless. There's simply no way to accept Fish's reader-response theory and make sense out of life.

Limits to Pluralism. The pluralism of postmodernity cannot be lived in certain contexts. As Mortimer J. Adler reminds us in his book *Truth in Religion*, "a stable and peaceful society cannot exist under the domination of two or more competing governments unless one is subordinate to the other."⁴⁶ Adler shows that pluralism has always existed when it comes to matters of taste, and is tolerable in that context, but not in the context of truth, and notes that "Anything that is transcultural is clearly in the sphere of truth."⁴⁷ Thus the pluralism endemic in postmodernity cannot survive in practice in certain contexts.

Pluralism began on planet-earth in Eden, when Satan denied God's word (Gen 3:1-5). We find it expressed well in the time of the Judges, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25). When everything is right, then nothing is right. And how can anybody know anything is right if there is no objective standard accepted by all who make that decision. Such is the limit of pluralism. It is simply intolerable where life is lived.

Opportunities for Truth in Postmodernity. Postmodernity gives opportunity for truth to regain what it lost to modernity. Too often the threat from modernity was accepted by the church, instead of being resisted. The modern world-

⁴⁵Norman R. Gullett, "Reader-Response Theories in Postmodern Hermeneutics: A Challenge to Evangelical Theology," *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery, 208-253.

⁴⁶Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth, An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 2.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 2-4.

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view had more influence than the biblical worldview, and the church gave in. The tragedy is now obvious as the modern worldview has been forced to give way to that of postmodernity.

Christianity's Capitulation to Modernity. Postmodernity has called modernity into question. Yet this is the modernity to which the church so often capitulated to keep its intellectual respectability. Since the 1960s, in the post-Vietnam era, many people have turned away from the materialism of the west to the mysticism of the east. Many of these are seeking for that which they sense is missing in the west. They turn to the east for fullness. They seek after Hinduism and Buddhism. "Those dissatisfied with secular modernity most often turn to the East or to the distant mythic past," says William C. Platcher, "One reason seems to be that Christianity cannot criticize our culture very effectively if it has already accepted many of the assumptions of that culture as the price of intellectual respectability."⁴⁸

The fact is, as Stanley Grenz points out, "most major Protestant denominations" "'defected' to 'modernism.'"⁴⁹ The tragedy is they capitulated—because unsure of their own biblical foundation—to science and culture. With the collapse of modernity the limitations of science have been demonstrated. Science cannot deal with ultimate or existential meanings. "Theology need cater to our prevailing styles of thought only if it wishes to," says Huston Smith. "Nothing in the way of evidence requires that it do so."⁵⁰ Accommodation follows close after the desire for acceptance. To confine Scripture to a cultural artifact is a case in point. Then Scripture ceases to be the Word of God to culture. It is judged by culture instead of the reverse.

More Room for Religion. Modernity stifled religion. It closed the door to the transcendent with its rejection of metaphysics. It confined the parameters to a closed continuum of cause and effect, so that God was removed from the realm of human history. Science limited reality to the observable, so that the religious dimension of human experience could only occupy an interior immanent substitute for objective reality. Now, with the collapse of this modern worldview, the strictures and confinement have been radically called in question.

"In a way that has never been possible in modernity, one can find philosophical or rational space for 'giving an account for the hope that is in you,' comments Don R. Stiver. "In other words, there is no philosophical hindrance that *a priori* calls such a response into question. And given the importance of reason in modernity, this renewed sense of the rationality of religion opens up a new social and cultural space for religion. In other words, if the opportunity can be seized, postmodernity allows conceptual space for religion's stretching its arms

⁴⁸William C. Platcher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 12.

⁴⁹Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 25.

⁵⁰Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind*, 146.

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and walking about in a way not possible in the cramped quarters allowed for it since the onset of modernity. The danger is that it may continue to pace back and forth in its all-too-familiar constricted confines, not knowing that the surrounding bars have long ago rusted away.”⁵¹

Intellectual Strength of Christianity. Diogenes Allen, in his book *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction*, speaks of “A new openness for faith.” He reminds us that Christianity has been on the defensive intellectually during modernity. During that period many have declared that the post-Christian age has dawned “on the basis of physics, biology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.”⁵²

We are now in an age when philosophy and science, once used to attack Christianity, are themselves under attack. It was during modernity that Christianity came under severe attack for the first time. This was a revolt against authority found in church and Scripture. Humans became their own authority, and human reason reigned supreme. This was the time when the historical critical methods of biblical study did their devastating work in the biblical documents. This is when evolutionary theory radically called in question the Genesis account of creation, and when geology questioned the universal flood. This was the time when human reason was elevated above divine revelation, thus bringing into captivity God’s Word to mankind. It’s this worldview that is collapsing.

As Allen notes, “No longer can Christianity be put on the defensive, as it has been for the last three hundred years or so, because of the narrow view of reason and the reliance on classical science that are characteristic of the modern mentality.” We have come to a new opportunity to reevaluate the viability of Christianity.⁵³

Purpose in the Biblical Worldview. There’s so much meaninglessness and purposelessness in postmodernity. If there was ever a time for the clear purpose of the biblical worldview to be heard it is now. Scripture tells mankind where it came from, why it is here, and where it is going, and thus answers the three basic philosophical questions that have interested mankind for millennia. This sure word about purpose needs to be heard today. As George G. Hunter rightly notes, “We have the opportunity to reintroduce purpose to a secular world that, because of science’s conditioning, is preoccupied with cause and effect and blind to the issues of purpose for human life and history.”⁵⁴

Foundation for Truth. Because biblical or any other texts have no meaning in themselves to postmoderns, and because they have no authoritative word to them, this has left postmoderns in a morass of meaninglessness. They wander around aimlessly without a purpose or goal. Yet they were made in the image of

⁵¹Dan R. Stiver, “Much Ado About Athens and Jerusalem: The Implications of Postmodernism for Faith,” *Review and Expositor*, 91 (1994): 94.

⁵²Diogenes Allen, 2.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴George G. Hunter, III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 95.

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God, with a desire to worship. They need to hear the certain Word of God from Scripture. Under the Holy Spirit of God this will meet their deepest needs.

Paradoxically, this is the time when people are standing up for their rights in an unprecedented way. The various liberation movements are an integral part of postmodernity. Yet these very movements reach beyond the relativism of culture to absolutes that belong to the biblical worldview. Gene Edward Veith, Jr. said it well: “Postmodernists, more than most people, complain about how various power structures are unfair, and they are always demanding sensitivity, tolerance, and justice. Do they not realize that they are appealing to transcendent, authoritative moral absolutes?”⁵⁵

Here’s another example that postmodern theory cannot be lived in practice. There is in humankind a reality that cannot be confined within any passing worldview that is out of sync with the biblical worldview. It’s this fact that gives Scripture a point of contact with its audience, even with postmoderns.

How to Reach Postmoderns with Biblical Truth: The Gospel as Transcultural, Transgenerational

The Gospel is everlasting (Rev 14:6), first given after the Fall of mankind (Gen 3:15) and consistently the same throughout Scripture. It’s this Gospel that Christ commissioned to be taken to the world (Matt 28:18-19), “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev 14:6) to the end of the world (Matt 28:20)—which includes postmodernity. It’s the good news about salvation that every human needs to hear. This presupposes that it’s possible to be heard by all, whatever their culture or experience.

Scripture states that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom 1:20). Paul speaks of the Gentiles having the law “written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness” (Rom 2:15). This includes postmoderns.

Humans were made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27) with a point of contact for God to communicate. Although this image has been defaced through the Fall (Gen 3:1-7) and subsequent sins, it’s not destroyed. This is why Christ is still the light that lightens everyone coming into the world (John 1:9). The fact of the *image* in no way discounts or detracts from Christ as the light to the world. Christ as Creator (John 1:1-2, Heb 1:1-2) chose to make mankind in such a way that after the Fall it would be possible to reach mankind in its fallen condition and bring enlightenment, even to postmoderns. It is also vital to recognize the function of the Holy Spirit in this process. For two things are crucial—to not underestimate the longing in the hearts of postmoderns, and to not underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit to satisfy that longing.

⁵⁵Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times*, 62.

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If Christ made all mankind in His image, this includes postmoderns. If Christ put within the human mind a longing for Himself, this includes postmoderns. If conscience is the location where God speaks and His voice is heard, then this includes the consciences of those who espouse postmodernity. Yes, postmoderns have overthrown the unified worldview of modernism. Yes, they are awash in a seemingly meaningless sea of pluralism without chart or compass. Yes, their lives are hectic, stress-filled and often dysfunctional. Yet still they bear the image of God and have a receiver on board to hear the good news of the gospel. Their case may seem hopeless, but their very hopelessness makes them long for hope, and open to the only One who can bring them meaning out of chaos. As Augustine of Hippo said, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

Reaching Generation X with Biblical Truth. Generation X is a product of postmodernity. The question, “how do we reach postmoderns with Biblical truth,” must also be asked of the Xers. In their book *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World*, William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi (an Xer) explain what the X generation is like. The X generation were born between 1961-1981. It was called the X generation because it was perceived that they stood for nothing and believed in nothing.⁵⁶ It’s a generation dominated by technology, half of them are divorced, one in three were abused, and it is the most aborted generation ever. Born in the time of President Nixon, they have never known trust in leadership. For the first time in American history, this is the generation, for the most part, who will not have it better than their parents.⁵⁷

Mahedi and Bernardi claim, “Einstein’s relativity theories along with quantum mechanics and recent discoveries in astronomy have rendered all previously held positions obsolete. Reality is far more complex than we had imagined it to be.”⁵⁸ It’s true that for some the new science has contributed to the insecurity in postmodernity. But far more than a new way to look at reality (for example, light as a particle or wave) is the insecurity produced by nuclear science. Postmoderns believe the world began with a “big bang” and wonder if it will end that way. The Xers have had a rough life and find themselves in a rough environment. “Aloneness defines the generation. This is not loneliness, rather it is a life of activity without ‘family and friends.’ Postmoderns struggle with “issues of abandonment, alienation and aloneness.” Their greatest need is for a cohesive family unit.⁵⁹ This is where we must begin. Not with Daniel 2. But with their needs, and attempt to meet them.

In fact, “Generation X has been spiritually starved, emotionally traumatized, educationally deprived, condemned to a bleak economic future and robbed

⁵⁶William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, *A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 10.

⁵⁷Ibid, 14-18.

⁵⁸Ibid, 42.

⁵⁹Ibid, 19, 21, 32.

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of the hope that should characterize youth.” They live in a time when the world has become a “global village,” when the major problems half way around the world are graphically displayed on the nightly news. In such a time “a great spiritual hunger has arisen around the world as we repudiate the moral and intellectual emptiness of modern life and resist the impersonal forces of vast and dehumanizing systems”⁶⁰

We must not underestimate this genuine spiritual hunger. The emotionally wounded and spiritually empty postmoderns face an end of their civilization very much like the ancient Athenians. They lack security. In spite of all the relativism, pluralism, lack of worldview, center, with dislike of systems, objectivity, absolutes, and the transcendent, the needs of postmoderns cry out for the very things they have rejected. This is crucial. Here again we see that they cannot live their own theories.

Perhaps the best way to help postmoderns is to come close to them and share with them what Christ has done for us and offer them a relationship with a personal and present God who loves them. Tell them they belong to His family. Christ lived and died for them. There is a certain future for them so much better than the present. Christ is coming for them, to give them that which they do not have and cannot get from the relativism and confusion of postmodernity. Christ’s presence with them now and His coming for them soon can give them the security that propositional truths bring, and set them free from the meaninglessness that comes from the many voices.

For after all, postmoderns were made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), and though that image is ever so damaged, it still provides a point of contact for the Holy Spirit to enlighten them (John 1:9). It is to postmoderns that the final cry will go forth, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great . . . Come out of her, my people” (Rev 18:2, 4). It will be an authoritative, certain and welcome voice to free postmoderns from the Babylonian confusion of pluralistic voices. Like ancient Athens, modern Babylon crumbles. It has nothing lasting to offer. The invitation to come out of her goes forth under the Latter Rain (Joel 2:28-29) “Spirit of Truth” (John 14:17), Who authored the Scriptures (1 Pet 1:10, 11; 2 Pet 1:21). He will come to “guide into all truth” (John 16:13). Christ the Living Word and Scripture the written Word, with its *sola Scriptura*, are the only hope for postmoderns. The Savior and Scripture provide the only optimistic worldview, with glorious love, purpose, peace, security, and hope which alone negates the meaninglessness, purposelessness, pluralism, relativism, and confusion of postmodern life.

Postmoderns are open to all voices and thus open to the voice of God. Many postmodern theories cannot be lived. Postmoderns are vulnerable, caused by disappointed relationships and disappointed theories. These make them vulner-

⁶⁰Ibid, 25, 43.

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able for a certain voice. We must not underestimate their need nor the ability of the Holy Spirit to meet it as we mingle among them as their friends.

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