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Generation Angst and the Ethical Paradox of Postmodernity

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Welcome to Postmodernity

In his book *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*, Walter Truett Anderson tells of standing one day on a cliff overlooking the Pacific ocean. He was looking down at a sea otter that bobbed in the surf far below. The otter floated happily and busily on its back in the water, holding an abalone in its forepaws and cracking the abalone's shell with a rock. The waves were coming in, and the otter was rocking about gently on the surface. The little animal was constantly moved this way and that way by the water, but seemed to pay no attention to this movement as it concentrated on its task. Then Anderson says, "I thought, how different from mine its experience of life must be, living in a medium in such flux and so unlike the hard ground on which I stood. But as I thought about it further, I realized that the medium in which I live is far more turbulent than anything the sea otter could ever conceive of—because as a human being, I bob about in a sea of symbols, an ocean of words."¹

What Anderson has in mind is the collapse of belief taking place in our postmodern society because of the overabundance of words and the competing moral vision they articulate. Words communicate ideas. They shape perceptions of reality. An ocean of words in our postmodern world is creating a smorgasbord of diverse values and beliefs where the permanent rightness of certain beliefs and values is no longer accepted, where the idea of objective or absolute or ultimate truth is fast becoming an archaism in our pluralistic American society.

¹Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (HarperSan-Francisco, 1990), ix.

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Like waves coming in and going out, our postmodern world brings constant flux and change. Five fundamental changes characterize the postmodern world view—ways of looking at reality/unreality that are evident in actions people are taking in relation to politics, religion, ethics, and culture. These changes include:

1. *Changes in thinking about thinking.* There is a growing awareness of the multidimensional, relativistic quality of human experience and the mind's ability to see itself and to see itself seeing itself and to step outside of reality constructs to examine them. This opens the way toward the idea that all explanations of reality are themselves constructions—human, useful, but not perfect.

2. *Changes in identity and boundaries.* Postmodernism is the age of fading boundaries, the twilight of a mind-set that structured reality with sharp lines. The boundaries between nations, races, classes, cultures, religions, moral systems, have all become less distinct. With it comes the loss of one-dimensional social identities. Multiple identity has become a common feature of postmodern life.

3. *Changes in learning and the purpose of learning.* The kind of learning that becomes necessary for survival in the postmodern age is the discovery kind of learning that includes an ongoing process of reality-construction.

4. *Changes in morals, ethics, and values.* Postmodernism accepts morality and moral discourse as a living and central element in human existence. Morality is not merely handed down, but learned and created and re-created out of experience and in dialogue with others. The morals of today are not the morals of yesterday, and they will not be the morals of tomorrow.

5. *Changes in relationship to traditions, customs, and institutions.*² Obviously these changes are interrelated. Changes in thinking and about thinking affect ethics and values. And changes in identity and boundaries affect relationships to traditions, customs, and institutions, etc. But ethics and values are the ultimate bottom line of how all these changes really touch human life. Because of this, ethics and values are, in fact, the driving force behind all other changes. People are pursuing certain values and desire an ethic that facilitates those values.

I want to take a few moments to outline morality as it is expressed in the postmodern perspective, then follow with a reality check on the emergent fiction postmodernism creates with respect to ethics.³ Finally, I want to share some pastoral perspectives for an Adventist ethos in the postmodern context.

²Anderson 254.

³According to Grenz, "*Postmodernism* refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the modern mind-set. *Postmodernity*, in turn, refers to an emerging epoch, the era in which we are living, the time when the postmodern outlook increasingly shapes our society. Postmodernity is the era in which postmodern ideas, attitudes, and values reign—when postmodernism molds culture. It is the era of the postmodern society." Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 12.

Morality in Postmodern Perspective

Anyone tuned into the contemporary dialogue on postmodernism knows that when it comes to the question of the postmodern approach to morality, it is all too often associated with the celebration of the supposed “emancipation” from moral standards and the disavowal of moral responsibility.⁴ We are witnessing, some assert, the “demise of the ethical” and the transition to a new “post-deontic” era where we are placed beyond moral duty. Morality is seen as having reached the end of the line. Such fashionable pronouncements cascade from the scientific and academic community, the arts, as well as the entertainment and news media, saturating our society’s view of ethics and morality so that the average GenXer believes there are no rules, no right, no wrong, no meaning, and no absolute truth.⁵

I particularly single out Generation X because it is the first generation to see the world through postmodern eyes. This generation truly thinks differently, perceives differently, believes differently, and processes truth differently from any previous generation.⁶ It is the generation leading the way towards relativism. According to Barna, adults in this generation reject absolute truth by a staggering 78 percent.⁷ The significance here lies in what Eugene Peterson refers to as “unwell in a new way.” He notes that there was a time when ideas and living styles were initiated in the adult world and filtered down to youth. Now the movement has been reversed: lifestyles are generated at the youth level and pushed upward. Dress fashions, hair styles, music, and morals adopted by youth are evangelically pushed on an adult world, which in turn seems eager to be converted.⁸

But the collapse of belief taking place in postmodern society does not, it turns out, really result in a collapse of morality: quite the opposite. According to Anderson:

“The early postmodern years are bringing, instead of collapse of morality, a renaissance of searching for principles of life that we variously call morals, eth-

⁴Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 2-4.

⁵Kevin Graham Ford, *Jesus for a New Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 114, 115, 117; Anderson, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be*; Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to the Theories of the Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997); Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993); Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds., *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1993).

⁶Ford, 113.

⁷As cited by William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 27.

⁸Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 128-129. (To be fair, it is true that many who have studied medieval and renaissance social history and literature would assert that those in their teens and twenties have nearly always formed the styles of their eras.)

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ics, values. And this is not merely a single shift of values but a continual dynamic process of moral discourse and discovery.⁹

For the eminent sociologist and postmodern theorist Zygmunt Bauman, the great issues of ethics have not lost their importance at all: they simply need to be seen and dealt with in a wholly new way.¹⁰ He sees our postmodern era as presenting the dawning, rather than a twilight, for ethics. The reality is not that postmodernism brings an end to morality or ethics, but that it brings an end to morality or ethics as modernism has framed it.¹¹ Postmodernism brings a radically new understanding of morality and ethics over against the many paths previously followed by ethical theories which began looking more like blind alleys.¹² I would suggest that as a sociologist, Bauman helps us understand the IS of postmodern ethics. I will only broadly outline his main thesis.

First, “The distinctly postmodern ethical problematic arises primarily from two crucial features of the postmodern condition: *pluralism* of authority, and the centrality of *choice* in the self-constitution of postmodern agents.”¹³

According to Bauman, pluralism of authority simply means the apparent absence of any universalizing authority. This rules out, then, the setting of binding norms which moral agents must obey. In effect it places moral responsibility wholly upon the moral agent. In other words, moral agents face now point-blank the consequences of their actions. This increased moral autonomy naturally leads to the question of ethical choice as a defining trait of postmodern agents. “Self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-evaluation become principle activities of the agents, indeed the mechanism synonymical with their self-constitution.”¹⁴

In the postmodern context, moral agents are constantly faced with moral issues and obliged to choose between equally well founded (or equally unfounded) ethical precepts. The choice always means the assumption of responsibility, and for this reason bears the character of a moral act.¹⁵ “It requires us not only to make moral choices, but also to add to our life-making responsibilities the task of creating and re-creating our ideas of what morality is.”¹⁶ Bauman terms this situation the “ethical paradox of postmodernity”:

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restored to agents the fulness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfill them

⁹Anderson, 259.

¹⁰Bauman, 4.

¹¹Ibid., 2.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 201.

¹⁴Ibid., 201-203.

¹⁵Ibid., 203.

¹⁶Anderson, 156.

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shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice. . . . In a cacophony of moral voices, none which is likely to silence the others, the individuals are thrown back on their own subjectivity as the only ultimate ethical authority. At the same time, however, they are told repeatedly about the irreparable relativism of any moral code.¹⁷

I want to note Bauman's reference to "the loneliness of moral choice" and the angst that this ethical paradox obviously suggests. The postmodern mindset is in sharp contrast to the optimistic cultural forecasts modernism gave promise of in terms of inevitable human progress through human reason, values, and abilities. Modernism emerged out of the deep human desire for structure in a world where human order appeared vulnerable and devoid of reliable foundations. Modernism was the attempt to bring structure and order to human existence, to order society in a way where certainty, orderliness, and homogeneity became the order of the day. Because modernism appears to have failed to deliver, postmodernity brings with it an existential insecurity—a pessimism where people are left alone with their fears not only about their own survival, but the world's survival.¹⁸

According to Bauman postmodernity has simply *privatized* our fears. This privatization of fears means privatization of escape routes and escape vehicles. It means DIY (Do It Yourself) escape. The only thing society can be expected to offer is a set of "self-assembly kits for DIY work." The social world becomes for the individual merely a pool of choices.¹⁹

Adding to this angst is a very practical dilemma: our consciences naturally yearn to have our moral choices affirmed. That requires some objective truth principle outside our own thinking, something postmodernism says doesn't exist.²⁰ According to Bauman, "the moral self is a self without a foundation."²¹ A person can never be entirely sure that he or she has acted in the right manner. "The moral self is a self always haunted by the fact that it is not moral

¹⁷Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, xxiv, xvii-xviii. "The postmodern consciousness has abandoned the Enlightenment belief in inevitable progress. Postmoderns have not sustained the optimism that characterized previous generations. To the contrary, they evidence a gnawing pessimism. . . . The postmodern generation is also convinced that life on earth is fragile" (Grenz, 13). See also, Ford, 113-118. (Some might say they have merely internalized and taken to heart the ecological agenda, political cynicism, and counter-cultural longings of their parents and so reaped the whirlwind.)

¹⁹*Ibid.*, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xviii.

²⁰"Behind the postmodern ethical paradox hides a genuine practical dilemma: acting on one's moral convictions is naturally pregnant with a desire to win for such convictions an evermore universal acceptance; but every attempt to do just that smacks of the already discredited bid for domination" (Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xxiii); "In so many situations in which the choice of what to do is ours and apparently ours alone, we look in vain for the firm and trusty rules which may reassure us that once we followed them, we could be sure to be in the right" (*idem. Postmodern Ethics*, 20).

²¹Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 62.

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enough.”²² It is moral, nonetheless, when it has set itself standards it cannot reach or placated itself with self-assurances that the standard has been reached.²³

Second, Bauman draws a contrast between moral responsibility and ethical theories or rules. Ethics provides the tools for moral life—the code of moral behavior, the assembly of the rules of thumb we follow. It answers the ever burning human question, “Why should I be moral?” In the postmodern perspective, however, previously followed ethical theories have not done a very good job of either answering the question, “Why should I be moral?” or outlining appropriate moral life. In other words, it is the ethical theories and the ethical rules that modernism has finally proved to be lacking.²⁴ It is the ethical theories, not the moral concerns of modern times, that have come to look like so many blind alleys.²⁵ According to Bauman, then, the postmodern perspective shows the relativity of ethical theories and the moral practices which ethical theories recommend or support, but not the relativity of morality itself.²⁶

In addition, Bauman suggests that the plethora of ethical theories have each in some way robbed the individual moral agent of his or her moral responsibility. Ethical theories and rules have depersonalized morality.²⁷ The artificially constructed ethical theories and rules of various sociological groups have dissolved the moral selves into an all-embracing “we” where personal moral impulse, moral responsibility, and moral intimacy is lost.²⁸ The failure of modernism’s ethical theory enables postmodernism to focus again on “the mystery of morality inside me” rather than morality being something outside of me. Hence, postmodernism becomes morality without external ethical code.²⁹ The notion of no universal standards does not release us from moral responsibility: it only increases it. It brings moral responsibility home to where it should be, inside the moral agent. Rules can be universalized, but morality can’t. Moral duties make humans alike; responsibility is what makes them into individuals.³⁰

Finally, Bauman speaks of postmodernism as bringing the “re-enchantment of the world”³¹ The postmodern mindset represents an abandonment of the rationalist belief system. The postmodern framework allows for the existence of realities that science cannot measure—the supernatural, the transrational, the spiritual, the paradoxical, the numinous, and mystery.³² Postmodernism thus

²²Ibid., 80.

²³Ibid., 81.

²⁴Ibid., 14.

²⁵Ibid., 2.

²⁶Ibid., 14.

²⁷Ibid., 16-36.

²⁸Ibid., 47.

²⁹Ibid., 31-36.

³⁰Ibid., 53, 54.

³¹Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, vii-xi.

³²See Anderson, 187-227; Ford, 123. As Anderson notes, in a chapter he calls “The Magic Bazaar,” “we seem to be in a world with more religion than there has ever been before. However, the

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opens up the ability to deal with aspects of morality that modernism often struggled against. We learn again to accept contingency and respect ambiguity, to feel regard for human emotions, to appreciate actions without purpose and calculable rewards. Not all actions need to justify and explain themselves to be worthy of esteem. There is the ability to live with events and acts that are not only not-yet-explained, but inexplicable.³³ It opens the way to re-personalize morality, to get in touch with the “mystery of morality inside me.”

Postmodernism elevates feeling to a level on par with, or superior to, rational thought. The postmodern worldview has intuition and emotion as its center, not intellect. The first question asked by a postmodernist is not “What do you think?” but “How do you feel?”³⁴ Subjective experience supercedes logic and objective facts.³⁵ Postmodernism creates a generation which is accustomed to paradoxes and processes truth relationally rather than propositionally.³⁶ Moral reflection and action follows accordingly. Such moral reflection and action is ambiguous, paradoxical, and often processed relationally.

According to Bauman, “the postmodern re-enchantment of the world carries a chance of facing human moral capacity point-blank.”³⁷ Postmodernity, one may say, is *modernism without illusions*.³⁸ As such it opens the way to morality without the illusions—moral choices are indeed choices, and moral dilemmas are indeed dilemmas. There is a certain amount of messiness to human existence and moral reality. Moral conflicts do occur.

In summary, postmodern ethics includes the following: pluralism of authority, centrality of choice, existential angst, re-personalizing morality, ethical systems discredited while morality is affirmed, and the re-enchantment of the world.

Reality Check—the Emergent Fiction

During the CBS evening news with Dan Rather, there is frequently a feature called “Reality Check.” During this news segment a report is made of some claim or statement by a government official, politician, etc., and then bam, a big rubber stamp comes across the screen that says, “Reality Check.” The news commentator then goes on to tell the other side (or the real side) of the issue in order to set the facts straight. As a sociologist, Bauman has persuasively defined morality from the postmodern perspective. He presents the IS of postmodern

situation is not really one to warm the heart of a true believer; the growth seems to have been quantitative rather than qualitative—more things to believe in, but not necessarily more of what we used to call belief” (Anderson, 187).

³³Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 33-34.

³⁴Ford, 128.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 115.

³⁶Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 51, 46.

³⁷Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 34.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 32.

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ethics. One may take issue with Bauman's own position on the issues he outlines, but his description of morality from a postmodern perspective is rather fair. He is correct in asserting basically that moral responsibility touches the heart of who I am as a person. He is correct, too, in noting that "we are not moral thanks to society (we are only ethical or law-abiding thanks to it), we *are* society, thanks to being moral. At the heart of sociality is the loneliness of the moral person."³⁹ Our question is whether or not postmodern ethics as he has described it fits moral reality, whether or not it fits what *ought to be* in terms of human moral theory and practice.

First, the postmodern ethics Bauman describes shares some of the same assumptions about human nature and the contingency of moral/social order that modernism has projected. I tend to agree with Scott H. Moore's assessment. He describes "postmodernity as a 'turn' rather than as an epoch or an era. Postmodernity is a modern problem and a modern phenomenon."⁴⁰ "Postmodernity is not what comes after modernity falls away, but it is that turn in which modernity's assumptions have been problematized and the continuity of our confidence has been called into question."⁴¹ Bauman would probably agree, as he himself states that postmodernity is *modernity without illusions*.

There are some fundamental shared presuppositions, then, between modernism and postmodernism when it comes to ethics, human nature, and human ability. Modernism celebrated human reason, human values, and the ability of human beings to bring social/moral structure to personal life as well as to the world. At bottom, postmodernism does the very same in that it celebrates the human moral capacity and human nature's ability to rise to challenging moral exigencies of contemporary society. It, along with modernism, is essentially humanistic.

Second, while postmodern ethics correctly critiques previously followed ethical systems for their apparent failure to deliver, and in doing so, asserts that it is the ethical theories and ethical rules, not morality itself, that are being called into question, it (postmodern ethics) nevertheless throws the baby out with the bath water. It overlooks the fact that the real problem is not with ethical theories per se, but with ethical systems that don't deliver. It denies the possibility that there might be an adequate moral theory out there, yet to be grasped and articulated for human moral formation and reflection. It also assumes an unnatural dichotomy between moral responsibility and ethical theory where the moral agent is said to be robbed of his/her autonomy or personal moral responsibility if the demands of some external ethical theory becomes universal and binding.

In principle, ethical theories and moral responsibility are not mutually exclusive. The universalizing of moral principles does not necessitate the dimin-

³⁹Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰Scott H. Moore, "Era and Epoch, Epoch and Era: Christian Intellectuals in the Postmodern Turn," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26/2 (Winter 1996): 133.

⁴¹Ibid., 137.

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ishing of the moral self. What is needed is an ethical theory that affirms moral responsibility in all of its necessary features and at the same time gives the moral agent the motivation and guidance it needs towards right moral choice.

A valid critique of modernity's ethical systems does not necessarily mean there are no valid systems at all. The apparent plurality of equally well founded (or equally unfounded) moral authorities does not negate this either. In fact it increases moral responsibility or choice, because the moral agent must become informed enough on the issues to be morally discriminating if he or she is to make the right moral choice.

In addition, the reality of human nature and the age-long phenomenon of enduring human problems points to the existence of moral structure corresponding to human nature. When the noted educator and prolific writer Mortimer Adler was once asked by a television interviewer, "How do you know there is a real, tangible world outside our minds?" Adler slowly turned his head toward the interviewer, and without cracking a smile, said, "It's no mystery. The world outside my mind never lets me forget it is there. When I run into a wall, reality abruptly stops me. When I throw cold water on my face, reality wakes me up. If I stub my toe or burn myself, reality brings me a taste of pain. If I ever think the external world is not there, reality finds a way to slap some sense into me. The external world is there. I have the bruises to prove it."⁴²

How could our postmodern society know for sure that there is moral structure to human nature and human relationships? The real moral world outside all this great sounding postmodern idea of the relativity of ethical theories and rules never lets us forget it. People on their own are stubbing their moral toes. People on their own are getting beat up and hurt. And so with societies. The question of ethics can never be pluralistic because the moral issues our world faces are very much human and transcend time and culture.⁴³ Bauman admits of this when he states,

Not all ethical issues found in a postmodern habitat are new. Most importantly, the possibly extemporal issues of the orthodox ethics—the rules binding short-distance, face-to-face intercourse between moral agents under conditions of physical and moral proximity—remain presently as much alive and poignant as ever before. In no way are they postmodern; as a matter of fact, they are not modern either.⁴⁴

Human beings need an external moral compass (ethical theory) in order to be morally responsible. When I visited the famed and very beautiful Cliffs of

⁴²As told by William D. Watkins, 225.

⁴³"They have accepted a reality that isn't real, that doesn't square with either the physical world or the moral order that is really there. They keep trying to live in the worlds of their own creation, but they keep running up against the real world, and they become bruised and broken in the collision. . . . they are bucking reality and are getting beat up in the process" (Watkins, 226).

⁴⁴Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, 201.

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More in Western Ireland, I learned something about rules and the centrality of human choice. These impressive cliffs rise 700 or so feet from the Atlantic ocean. Large open meadows roll right up to the edge where paths wind their way along the precipices. Obviously people come to see and look down. And some have fallen down. Over the years they have built miles of stone wall with warning signs along the way. I was intrigued with the way some of those signs read—they don't say, "People have fallen." Rather, they read, "People are falling." Despite warnings and barriers and slippery slopes and loose rocks, people keep falling. Why? Because they don't take the warning signs seriously. They don't need signs or fences. They think they know enough on their own. They get close and look down because they are confident of their ability to judge the situation. Yet people keep falling and dying.

Ethical theory works within three interrelated levels—theological and philosophical bases, universal principles, and rules for action in specific areas of life. When it is asserted that the moral agent needs no moral framework to work within, we are basically assuming too much of our fallen human nature and are overlooking how very much we need guidance in making moral choices. After all, as Bauman notes, our inner being cries out for such universal objective structure in order, not only to guide us through moral dilemmas, but to also assure our conscience that we have done well.

I'm intrigued with William D. Watkins' assessment of the our postmodern moral perspective in his recent book, *The New Absolutes*. Commenting on whether or not relativism really rules the American conscience—Do we really live as if right and wrong, truth and error, are up for grabs? Are we really operating without any sense of objective values?—he states, "the answers lie not so much in stated belief as in actual behavior. That difference makes all the difference in the world."⁴⁵ He asserts that:

We Americans are absolutists, despite any rhetoric to the contrary. Over the years, we have certainly changed what we believe and how we live, but we have not embraced relativism. . . . The American people may say they accept the notion that a truth claim or moral claim is relative, but they do not behave as if this is true. Their behavior exposes what they really accept—that what they believe is true or right for them should be (and actually is) true or right for everyone else.⁴⁶

Watkins' bottom line is that since we are a nation of absolutists at odds with one another, our differences must be over different understandings of what we believe is absolutely true.⁴⁷In other words, no one ever truly functions without a world-view or system of absolutes. The postmodern metanarrative is simply that there are no metanarratives except one's own.

⁴⁵Watkins, 34.

⁴⁶Ibid., 44.

⁴⁷Ibid.

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This brings me to Ecclesiastes and what I think Solomon has to say about postmodern ethics and about postmodernity's ocean of words with their competing visions of moral and spiritual reality. "For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness" (Eccl 5:7). "The fool multiplies words and no man knows what will happen" (Eccl 10:14). Solomon's point is that there are a lot of words being spoken, some of which are just plain empty, and they all can cause a lot of moral and spiritual confusion. Words are very powerful. They shape our perception of reality. They create reality for others as well as ourselves.

There's an old joke about three umpires that takes us to the heart of what Solomon has in mind. They were sitting around having a beer after a baseball game. One says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are." Another responds, "There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third umpire says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't *nothin'* until I call 'em."⁴⁸ That third umpire is clearly postmodern.

Solomon is talking about our tendency to create our own reality through words or describe reality as we see it or want it to be seen. Words express what we think, what we want to see happen. Words for Solomon are very important. God creates reality by what He says (Ecclesiastes, I suggest, was written with Genesis in hand, as evidenced by its themes). God spoke and it was done. He commanded and it stood fast. His word is truth. In a lesser way, we create reality by what we say, whether verbally or in our minds.

In fact, Solomon himself did a little reality-creating. Referring to his writing of Ecclesiastes, he says, "*the Preacher sought to find delightful words*" (Eccl 12:10). Solomon was a master preacher. An orator who knew the power of words to create reality. A writer who understood what words can do. So he chose beautiful words. Creative words. Words that would catch attention, convince, persuade.

Besides, Solomon says, "*But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body*" (Eccl 12:12). He understood the existential angst and soul wearing pain that comes with the challenge of wading through all possible roads one could travel to find the meaning and purpose of life, or to know how he or she should live morally. The existential angst and soul wearing pain that comes with creating one's own reality, one's own morality. Solomon tried it all, everything under the sun—the hedonist's solution of partying harder, the philosopher's solution of thinking deeper, the intellectual's solution of studying further, the materialist's solution of acquiring more, and the religionist's solution of doing church.⁴⁹ His "been there, done that, now what" experience makes him very postmodern, and with all the existential angst and soul wearing pain that goes with it. "*I set my mind to seek and explore . . . it is a grievous task which God has given to the*

⁴⁸Anderson, 75.

⁴⁹See Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

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sons of men to be afflicted with,” he says (Eccl 1:13). “*In much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain,*” he adds (Eccl 1:18).

It is astonishing that Solomon would write this when books were rare. In much simpler times. In a pre-modern era. His thoughts apply to our postmodern time as if the book were written only yesterday and suggest to me that the post-modern condition is not all that different than any other age, except that it might be more sophisticated, radical, and all-encompassing in terms of its influence and grip on contemporary culture.

Ecclesiastes outlines the whole aspect of our postmodern world and its perspective on morality—the bobbing like an otter in an ocean of beliefs and values and ideas. It includes the plurality of authority where we are pressed with the centrality of personal choice and feel the angst and uncertainty and fear that go along with it. For sure, there is the philosophical and practical emptiness of all the explored ethical theories— a “Been there. Done that. Now What? So What! They don’t deliver. I’m empty and confused, and alone.”

We find, too, Solomon’s rational attempt to dis-enchant his world by leaving God out of the equation. A Danish philosopher tells the story of a spider who dropped a single strand down from the top rafter of an old barn and began to weave his web. Days, weeks, and months went by, and the web grew. It regularly provided the spider food as flies, mosquitoes, and other small insects were caught in its elaborate maze. The spider built his web larger and larger until it became the envy of all the other spiders. One day this productive spider was traveling across his beautifully woven web and noticed a single strand going up into the darkness of the rafters. *I wonder why this is here?* he thought. *It doesn't serve to catch me any dinner.* And saying that, the spider climbed as high as he could and severed the single strand that was his sustenance. When he did, the entire web slowly began to tumble to the floor of the barn, taking the spider with it. That's what happened to Solomon. As Ed Young writes,

Somewhere along the way . . . Solomon clipped the strand that united him with God *above the sun* and decided to find meaning and satisfaction in a life lived strictly *under the sun*. In other words, he chose a life lived on his own terms, in a natural dimension with no reference to the divine.⁵⁰

Reading Ecclesiastes we can sense how Solomon would systematically critique the ethical systems of his day and conclude in the process that personal moral responsibility could never ever be gotten away from no matter how many ethical systems didn’t work.

In the end, Solomon calls for a “Reality Check.” Like postmoderns, he accepts the need to re-personalize morality. He re-enchants his world and goes the

⁵⁰Ibid., 15, 16.

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next step to accept the reality that God has something to say, that in this ocean of words there is a word from the Lord, that there are right and truthful words.

Notice how he ends Ecclesiastes: “*The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly*” (Eccl 12:10). He wanted to find creative, captivating words. Convincing words. Persuasive words. But he wanted to write words of truth. And he wanted to put these true words together correctly. The NIV says it this way, “*what he wrote was upright and true*” (Eccl 12:10).

In effect, Solomon is pitting God’s word against the ocean of words in his world. He is pitting God’s word against our words. He affirms an ultimate reality. An ultimate authority. There are some “well-driven nails” of certainty, as he goes on to say—“*the words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails*” (Eccl 12:11). There are nails of certainty to hang our perceptions of moral reality on.

It all comes down to this: “*The conclusion, when all has been heard, is fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Because God will bring every act to judgement, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil*” (Eccl 12:13, 14). Human ethical systems discredited while morality is still affirmed? Yes! Centrality of choice? Yes! Re-personalized morality? Yes! Re-enchantment of the world? Yes! Plurality of authorities? NO! Existential angst? Only if you don’t fear God or accept His pattern for moral life.

Like the otter, we can survive in a world of flux and movement because of some very fundamental moral/spiritual principles that exist for all human beings, no matter how much movement of ideas there may be around him or her.

Adventist Ethos in a Postmodern Context

In conclusion I want to touch on the question of what shape a Seventh-day Adventist approach to ethics should include. I am not, here, outlining a comprehensive moral theory. I am merely reacting to postmodern ethics as I have just described it—plurality of authority, centrality of choice, re-personalizing morality, re-enchantment of the world, existential angst and insecurity, the discrediting of prevailing ethical theories without relativizing moral responsibility.

Stanely J. Grenz ends his *Primer on Postmodernism* with a chapter on “The Gospel and the Postmodern Context.”⁵¹ Here he asserts that as Christians we must both stand our ground and share ground in a postmodern world. I will interpret him in the narrower context of ethics rather than the wider context of the gospel which he has in view. On the one hand, we will reject postmodernism’s abandonment of the belief in universal truth and its corollary for ethics—there are no rules, no right, no wrong, no meaning. If truth is relative, then morality is relative. We can accept the plurality of authority as a sociological fact, but not

⁵¹Grenz, 161-174.

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an ideological one. As Alister McGrath notes, there is a difference between pluralism as a fact of life and pluralism as an ideology. We can accept the former, but not the latter.⁵²

When it comes to the question of authority we will assume that God knows what He is talking about and that He is the ultimate authority for ethics. We will continue to affirm, as well, that Scripture is an ideal and primary moral textbook that communicates morality through story, principles, concrete commands, and divine example. The moral address of Scripture is from a personal God to us as persons. The moral address of Scripture is internal—dealing with being and doing—not legalistic, abstract, or external. It speaks to the heart and examines our intentions. It is sensitive to human beings in a sinful deprived condition, in need of grace, forgiveness, moral vision, and power. And it is metacultural.

On the other hand, we will take advantage of postmodernism's critique of modernism's assumptions and supposed accomplishments with its elevation of human reason and its utopian social ethical systems for structuring human society.⁵³ Morality at bottom is not purely rational. Solomon said it succinctly: "*What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted*" (Eccl 1:15). In other words, no amount of knowledge or rationalism will make an immoral person moral, or a selfish person generous, an impure mind turn from pornography. Nor does knowledge or rationalism make something of nothing. It can't create something that is not there. If a void exists in a person's life, rational knowledge will not fill it. According to Ecclesiastes, human reason on its own opens the way toward much grief.

Postmodernity's re-enchantment of the world has opened up a tremendous opportunity for Christian ethics. As Kevin Ford writes:

The postmodern mind set represents an abandonment of the rationalist belief system. The postmodern framework allows for the existence of realities that science cannot measure—the supernatural, the trans-rational, the spiritual, the eternal, the ineffable, the numinous. These are all realities that are central to the biblical story . . . The collapse of the modern worldview has given the Christian worldview a beachhead in the postmodern mind.⁵⁴

Win Manning asserts, "It opens up the ability to deal with spiritual and metaphysical issues on a level that was not possible twenty years ago."⁵⁵ Grenz

⁵²Alister E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/3 (September 1992): 361-363.

⁵³Inasmuch as postmodernity represents a perspective that calls into question the world of facts, particularly the world of facts as the non-Christian, secular world understands it, then Christians have a vested interest in denying this world of facts. Thus, Christians have every reason to be excited about the opportunities that are opened up by postmodernity, not because we deny the existence of just any collection of facts but because we deny the existence of a particular set of facts" (Moore, 134).

⁵⁴Ford, *Jesus for a New Generation*, 123.

⁵⁵Win Manning of the George Gallup Institute as quoted by Ford, 124.

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suggests that the contours of a postmodern gospel would be post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noetic.⁵⁶ I believe the same would be true for ethics. Postmodern Christian ethics would undoubtedly be post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, post-poetic, and post-individualistic. Ethics would touch the whole person. Ethics would take people beyond mere knowledge of right and wrong toward being and doing. Ethics would lead past human agency toward objective truths and a personal God Who both commands and empowers.

I find Grenz's notion of a post-individualistic gospel (and thus Christian ethic) very intriguing and useful for Christian ethics in a postmodern context. One of the phenomena of postmodernity is the shift from the raw individualism of modernity toward community and significant relationships. Truth in the postmodern context is processed more relationally than it is rationally or propositionally.⁵⁷ Feelings and relationships supersede logic and reason. The same is true for morality, ethics, and values. The postmodern mind does not respond well to intellectual arguments. Logic is looser, but relationships are more powerful. There is a social dynamic to moral thinking and decision making. A Generation Xer who mirrors postmodernism will say, "*Let me see it in your life before you tell it to me with your words.*"

This says volumes about the power of morally mature Christians to influence and mold people's lives, to model the beauty of biblical moral life in such a way that one has the right to explain the reasons afterward. It is very biblical: "*Follow me as I follow Christ,*" Paul says. Here lies the potential power behind our unique message for this world filled with competing voices. Our power to engage people with truth, whether theological or moral, will be in proportion to the power that those truths have had in our individual and community moral experience.

This brings me to my final thought—the enduring existential angst and insecurity that weighs so heavily upon our postmodern generation because of moral failure, moral dilemma, and perceived (no matter how much postmodernism will deny it) moral duty. The sense of helplessness, of hopelessness, of gnawing loneliness, is real, driving many towards cynicism and ambivalence in terms of any solution. Ours is the challenge of bridging to postmodern yearnings and postmodern thirst. To assure them we are not out there on our own. That there is *someone* we can trust. That there is *something* we can trust. But they must see the difference in our lives. They must be able to "read between the lines" of our everyday lives and the moral choices we make only sweet peace and security. They must read in our Adventist ethos something other than the confusion and angst that they find in our world.

⁵⁶Grenz, 167.

⁵⁷Celek and Dieter, 51.

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Alister McGrath suggests the most powerful solution is to orient ourselves toward an event, not an idea, per se.⁵⁸ That event is the story of Jesus. For our media-saturated, story hungry postmodern generation, Leighton Ford suggests “The Power of Story”⁵⁹—where telling the story of Jesus and the story of how Jesus has touched our own personal life creates vision which transforms character and yields compelling evangelistic influence and power to change people’s lives for Christ. It gives people a point of connection in their everyday lives, enabling them to see how Jesus *the Truth* and the truth of Jesus can interact with their own moral lives.

In conclusion I would have us note the words of Scott Moore:

the rules in postmodernity come down to this: the *regulae fide*. It is the rule of faith . . . some of these rules are going to look very much like premodern forms of discourse. Some of the rules are going to be new and innovative and exciting. Some of them are going to be very sensible and reasonable. They are going to be very modern because postmodernity is not what comes after modernity falls away, but it is that turn in which modernity’s assumptions have been problematized and the continuity of our confidence has been called into question.⁶⁰

As Seventh-day Adventists we have the privilege of seizing the opportunities postmodernism brings us in a way that enables us to present a biblical alternative that genuinely fills the moral spiritual angst of a generation caught in ethical paradox.

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⁵⁸Alister E. McGrath, “The Christian Church’s Response to Pluralism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35/4 (December 1992): 497-499.

⁵⁹Leighton Ford, *The Power of Story* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1994).

⁶⁰Moore, 137.