The Postmodern Puzzle

When there are no absolute truths and no rules of logic, how do we defend the gospel?

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A friend of mine told me that when Christian apologist and author Ravi Zaccharias visited Columbus to speak at Ohio State University, his hosts took him to visit the Wexner Center for the Arts. The Wexner Center is a citadel of postmodern architecture. It has stairways leading nowhere, columns that come down but never touch the floor, beams and galleries going everywhere, and a crazy-looking exposed girder system over most of the outside. Like most of postmodernism, it defies every canon of common sense and every law of rationality.

Zaccharias looked at the building and cocked his head. With a grin he asked, “I wonder if they used the same techniques when they laid the foundation?”

His point is very good. It’s one thing to declare independence from reality when building a monument. It’s another thing when we have to come into contact with the real world. Reason and science suddenly matter again!

The Wexner Center is a memorable picture of the internal contradictions within postmodernism. For those of us who want to dialogue with postmodernists, the Wexner Center also highlights an opportunity. Many people who accept postmodern notions have never realized such contradictions exist. The contradictions, therefore, become entry-points to communication.

Postmodernism’s views of so-called creativity and constructed truth provide one of the most striking contradictions.

Goose-Stepping on Campus

Those of us working with college students today are amazed at how uniform their responses are to every question about religion or values. The same relativistic formulas invariably slide out with hardly any difference—even in word order! This brings up a crucial question: If truth and reality are so up-for-grabs that anyone can create new reality at will, why is everybody saying exactly the same thing? Shouldn’t we be hearing a wide variety of worldviews and ideas? Where is all the diversity? Where is all the anticipated creativity? Instead of wildly diverse approaches to thought, we see today students goose-stepping smartly to a party line that allows no variation.

The reason we see such conformity is that postmodernism is nothing less than a totalistic metanarrative—an all-pervasive account of reality—the very thing they dread the most. Though advanced under the slogan of tolerance, postmodernism has shown no inclination to tolerate any deviation from its narrow party line. Postmodernists have successfully demonstrated that those in earlier decades and centuries who believed in absolutes often were not tolerant. What they haven’t shown is that those who deny absolutes are tolerant.

The landscape today isn’t becoming more tolerant. Postmodernists bequeath tolerance only on certain views and groups. Others are experiencing rejection, judgment, and even compulsion at the hands of supposedly inclusive thinkers. Some
Postmodernists, as the guardians of the oppressed, are prepared to pursue their theories of language-constructed reality even to the radical extreme of controlling when people laugh!

You are a harasser when . . .
You exclude someone from a study group because that person is of a different race, sex, or ethnic origin than you are;
You tell jokes about gay men and lesbians;
Your student organization sponsors entertainment that includes a comedian who slurs Hispanics;
You laugh at a joke about someone in your class who stutters;
You comment in a derogatory way about a particular person or group’s physical appearance or sexual orientation, or their cultural origins, or religious beliefs;
A male student makes remarks in class like “Women just aren’t as good in this field as men,” thus creating a hostile learning atmosphere for female classmates.¹

Imagine it. Now we have groups about whom no one is allowed to make a joke! Worse still, you can be hauled in not only for telling a joke but for laughing at a joke! They’re not kidding, either. The article that details these campus codes cites examples of students prosecuted under these rules. Postmodernists, as the guardians of the oppressed, are prepared to pursue their theories of language-constructed reality even to the radical extreme of controlling when people laugh! Orwell himself would be shocked.

One University of Michigan student filed a lawsuit to defend his right to report his laboratory findings involving differences in competencies between men and women. No, postmodernism’s denial of truth has not resulted in any great upsurge of tolerance. It has ushered in a lack of concern for freedom.

The uniformity of postmodern culture leaves biblical Christians feeling left out. We find ourselves saying something widely different from other people, and we find we are the only ones saying it.

Cross-Cultural Communication

When communicating with postmodernists or those influenced by the postmodern shift, we as evangelicals have the sure answers people need. But we stand a greater distance from those with whom we communicate than we did just thirty years ago. At that time, substantial Judeo-Christian assumptions were still common in secular culture. To bridge the gap today, we need to introduce additional steps in the communications process. It’s not impossible to communicate with postmodern culture; it’s just more difficult.

Suppose a villager in another land engaged me in conversation about how we could fend off the forest worm-demons who are boring holes in people’s teeth. Some villagers are pressing for an immediate sacrificial ceremony, but he might try to convince me that this has been tried before. He thinks that we should move the village to a new location with fewer demons. At some point I would probably interrupt him. “Excuse me,” I say with my hand raised. “We have a problem here. I can’t share my views about how to fend off these demons because I don’t believe they exist!”

The gap between the villager’s starting point and my starting point is too great for us to communicate about demon countermeasures. This analogy falls short, however. The distance between us and postmodern thinkers is far greater than that between the villager and myself. As Christians we not only believe differently from postmodern thinkers, our perspectives are automatically offensive to one another.

To grasp the difficulty of our task, we need a different analogy. Suppose I live in the Pacific Northwest. I am an avid environmentalist, and I am going to my neighbor’s house to ask him to sign a petition to save the trees. On the way to his house, I meet him walking on his way to my house. He works for a local logging company, and wants me to sign his petition to strengthen the bridge over a nearby creek so they can use larger trucks, thus increasing lumber production by felling some of the trees too fat to fit on their present trucks! How likely is it that either one of us will sign the other’s petition? These positions are worse than antithetical. They are mutually offensive.
In the same way, when we argue for absolute truth and universal objective ethics—not to mention the exclusive claims of Christ—we offend our postmodern hearers profoundly. No wonder some evangelicals are tempted to soft-sell truth and look for common ground in the area of experience! No wonder others are ready to write off an entire generation and build forts to hide out from them!

Bridging the Gap

Again, the communication dilemma here isn’t hopeless. It’s just more demanding than anything most Western Christians have had to face. Missionaries know that success in cross-cultural communication requires patience and care in how we approach each discussion. Careless communicators are rarely successful in a cross-cultural context, and they menace all other Christians as they blithely offend people in the name of Christ.

Missions experts are well aware of the need for careful research, patient development of relationships within the community, and fluency in local language, including the ability to deliver the gospel in the local vernacular. The same principles translate to our own culture. If we expect to be successful at witnessing to postmodern people, including our own kids and their friends, we need to understand the postmodern outlook.

Optimism Lives

Along with our problems in communication today, we also have good reasons for optimism. Here is only a partial list:

A house divided—Jesus warned that a house divided cannot stand. Today, Satan’s house is divided. Modernists and postmodernists slug it out with one another in culture, government, and universities. The new force in society—postmodernism—is no closer to Christianity than our old foe, modernism. But perhaps their struggle with one another means opportunity for us.

Postmodern nihilism—As Dr. Jim Fidelibus, a Christian psychologist, points out, no worldview is more likely to produce depression and despair than postmodern nihilism ("nothing-ism," the belief that nothing matters). We may well see a rebound from postmodern extremes as society recognizes the need for norms of some kind. However, this possibility contains dangers of its own. When Germany reacted to the moral anarchy of the Weimar period, the result was Hitler. Today, we sense a cry for social order and moral norms, but often this cry is for a new secular morality based on utilitarian grounds. Christian leaders are naive when they welcome moral authoritarianism without Christ. On the positive side, may not the search for norms open doors for Christian witness in a way similar to that in the former Soviet Union?

The power of God—God declares that His invisible attributes and eternal nature are “evident within them” (Romans 1:19). He also predicted that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of their need for Christ (John 16:8-11). In other words, people know in their heart that truth exists, that they are separate from their Creator, and that they need personal conversion. Therefore, with God preparing the way, we will experience more success than we might expect. (Of course, the same passage warns that people “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”) A logger or an environmentalist would be lucky to win the other over one time in a thousand. But we will do far better if we move ahead carefully and prayerfully. Postmodernism is a fortification raised up against the knowledge of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). But we are fully equipped to overcome such fortifications with the truth.

Postmodern loneliness—Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Among our most powerful “good works” in the present situation is our ability to love one another as Christ loved us. At its core, postmodern culture is profoundly lonely. When people exchange the possibility of a servant-style love for the hollow values of “respect” and “toleration,” the result is interpersonal distance. They become wrapped up in avoiding “off-limits” statements, avoiding disagreement with another’s views, and standing up for their own rights. Christians are free from these concerns under the security of God’s authority and love. We can build real relationships and community the secular world can only envy. Many postmodernists have been won to Christ after they beheld a group of Christians sharing the love of Christ with one another.

Detailing how to witness to postmodernists is too extensive to cover here. I will, however, offer some promising strategies for Christians to explore in sharing Christ in a postmodern culture. To preview my argument, I advocate the following steps:

“At its core, postmodern culture is profoundly lonely. When people exchange the possibility of a servant-style love for the hollow values of ‘respect’ and ‘toleration,’ the result is interpersonal distance.”
Discovering Presuppositions

When talking to people in our postmodern culture, we find that few fully understand the basis for the views they have adopted. Therefore, the first step for effective communication often is helping people understand their own views as well as a few of the problems inherent in those views.

Some groups in our church have used a discussion format to draw out postmodern presuppositions. We share this model—what we call Conversation and Cuisine—not because we think it’s the only way to communicate with postmodern culture, but because it illustrates the kinds of new approaches we need to develop.

In a Conversation and Cuisine event, a Christian group gathers in a home with their non-Christian friends for a dinner-party discussion group. Guests are reassured that all views are welcome, and that this isn’t a church meeting. After dinner, the discussion topic might be “To Judge or Not to Judge.” The discussion facilitator presents pairs of situations involving different types of judgments, and the group discusses whether they would feel comfortable casting judgment in that situation.

For example:

**Scenario 1:**

Your white workmate is helping an African-American workmate unravel a problem in the computer database. You overhear the white, in his frustration, call the African American a “dumb N.” She looks up with hurt on her face. You denounce the white worker for prejudice and for hurting another’s feelings.

To judge your white workmate is: *Okay* or *Bad*

**Scenario 2:**

Your other friend at work announces she is getting divorced. She has fallen in love with another man, and although she has two children she has told her husband she “cannot continue to live a lie.” Her husband and children are crushed, but she feels she must be true to herself. You charge her with selfishness, lack of loyalty, and willingness to hurt others’ feelings.

To judge your friend is: *Okay* or *Bad*

Both judgments involve someone having feelings hurt through the actions of another. But most postmodern-influenced thinkers are more willing to approve passing judgment in scenario #1 than in scenario #2. While there are several valid points people might raise—such as the fact that we don’t know what the adulterer’s husband was like—the main effect of the pairing is to create confusion.

At this point, the facilitator raises an interesting question. “How would people have answered this same pair thirty years ago?” Most agree that judgment in #2 would have been made without hesitation two or three decades ago. And although people thirty years ago might have resented the racial epithet in #1, they may have concluded that “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” Today, most secular people believe that the crime in #1 is morally far worse than that in #2, if indeed #2 represents anything wrong at all—just the reverse of what the same crowd would have concluded thirty years ago.

Why the difference between today and thirty years ago? Scenario #2 is definitely more socially acceptable today, even though the damage from family breakup may dwarf the actual damage from saying something wicked. Racism, of course, is by no means a minor problem whether today or thirty years ago. The purpose of the discussion isn’t to promote racism but to uncover presuppositions.

When postmodern guests begin to suggest that the change from thirty years ago to today is the result of morality being a product of cultural paradigms, we pose this question: “So are we suggesting that using the ‘N’ word was okay thirty years ago? Or was it wrong, but they just thought it was okay?”

This question causes postmodern thinkers to seize up in confusion. If they say it was really okay to call someone by a racial slur, they condone the racism of the past. But if they say people only thought it was okay, they suggest that a universal standard of right and wrong exists—one which people thirty years ago may have missed, but which we now know. Either position contradicts central postmodern assumptions.

By struggling with these internal contradictions in an accepting atmosphere, postmodern-influenced people realize they are willing to judge. Yet they are perplexed by their own unspoken rules governing judgment. Modernists have problems here as well. They have no more solid basis for moral judgments than postmodernists, and neither can they explain why they hold to moral views now or why they were held to in the past. Underlying the whole question is the obvious need for moral authority.

Guiding Others Into Discovery

Of course, we don’t want to merely leave people confused. We create confusion in order to *thaw the dogmatism of postmodern thinking*. The
next step is to gently push postmodern thinkers to realize the logical outcome of their presuppositions. Again, an example may help us see one way this can be done. The same group discussing judgment later introduces another scenario:

You visit an African tribe during their female circumcision ritual and behold a teenage girl receiving a clitorectomy. When you complain to your tour guide, he points out your Eurocentric values are interfering with your judgment.

To judge the tribal ritual is: Okay or Bad

This scenario raises more complicated contradictions for the postmodern thinker. Female circumcision is a manifestation of misogyny and control of women. The procedure guarantees women will never experience orgasm, and therefore will take no pleasure from sex. In the words of one African apologist, the practice “free[s] women from their bondage to lust to find their true identity as mothers.” The girls have little or no say in whether they receive the procedure. Viewed objectively, this practice is a savage and brutal violation of women, as feminists have rightly pointed out.

But there’s a problem. Female circumcision is also a time-honored religious rite of passage in another culture—in an oppressed, non-Western, non-white culture at that. It is, therefore, off-limits to postmodern judgment of any kind. In culturally postmodern groups, we often find those who agree with the tour guide. They feel we cannot judge this situation because we have no context from which to view it other than our own cultural reality. Someone might suggest that we can’t force our view on them, but this is a different point. The question is not how to change their culture—by force or by persuasion—but whether we should even try. Some postmodern-influenced thinkers are confused by this dilemma, while the more militant postmodernists are clear: We cannot judge their social reality. Condoning clitorectomies naturally makes the women in the group nervous.

But we don’t let them off the hook so easily. Suppose we consider New Guinea, where for centuries tribes have hunted members of other tribes and taken their heads as totems, talismans, or fetishes. Today, under the influence of Western colonial culture, the government of New Guinea has outlawed head-hunting. Do those in our discussion agree with this move, or not? More confusion. The militant postmodernists stand their ground.

“How can we judge a practice that has been going on for hundreds of years, and is a religious practice to boot?” “Who do we think we are to judge this culture, when we have x, y, and z evils in our own culture?”

Their point is good. We usually show that they are merely repeating a truth observed two decades ago by Francis Schaeffer: “If there is no absolute by which to judge the state [or here, the culture] then the state [culture] is absolute.” We have to agree that for us to judge events in another culture isn’t possible apart from the existence of a moral absolute that applies to all cultures, whether it is acknowledged or not. When we put such a point on it, the postmodernists’ position either hardens or begins to soften.

Finally, we are ready to consider one more example: What about Hitler’s Germany? They had a rich cultural heritage of anti-Semitism, including killing Jews, that went back for centuries. Were we wrong to judge Nazi culture and intervene militarily to stop what we considered oppression?

Now we’re really confused. At one discussion, a postmodernist spoke up after a short silence to say that this was different because it was our own culture—we are Europeans too.

“So if it was in India or China, we’d have no problem with it?” I wondered.

He nodded reluctantly—faithful and dogmatic to the bitter end.

Others in the room were groaning by now. We might not be able to win the most militant postmodernists, but the majority of people follow postmodern ideals like they do clothing fashions. They aren’t deeply committed to the postmodern agenda, and they will reconsider their position if they find their assumptions failing the test.”

“Timing in Communication”

Please note that we didn’t share the gospel itself at the discussion I described. We left them with nothing more than the suggestion that perhaps our culture has discarded the concept of judgment too quickly and completely. We reminded them that we need to discover a universal basis for moral judgment—and other types of judgment—if we are to have anything to say about evil in other cultures or in our own. And we pointed out that as Christians we believe we have answers in this area.

If the guests from that discussion go home rethinking their positions, our pre-evangelistic task
is complete, successful for the time being. If we maintain relationships with these people, we can follow up our first conversations. Once people’s thinking has been thawed—or even shocked—out of their totalistic postmodern patterns, they will have a new receptiveness to the gospel and apologetic material. They will begin to take our concepts seriously, examining the rational validity of our arguments and the consistency between our “walk” and our “talk.” If we have brought together the other elements of successful evangelism—including the subjective, relational parts—we will do well with many of these hearers.

We use a number of subjects as a basis for Conversation and Cuisine discussions in our church. Examples of relevant, interesting subjects where postmodern contradictions abound include the following:

- The environment
- The family in modern culture
- Social ethics
- The existence and nature of God
- Forgiveness in relationships
- Workplace ethics
- Dealing with guilt feelings
- Medical ethics
- Education
- The causes of urban crime
- What is love?
- Different views of the afterlife
- The ethics of wealth
- Animal rights and human responsibility
- Current event(s) like the O. J. Simpson trial or the Rodney King trial

Again . . . space prevents us from sharing fully on even this one example. But you can get more free information on how to hold Conversation and Cuisine events as well as other practical ideas by phoning Xenos Fellowship or by visiting our World Wide Web site, both listed at the end of this article.

**Legitimate Subjective Witness**

In John 13:34-35 and John 17:21-23, Jesus taught that the unity and love Christians express with each other is compelling evidence of the truthfulness of Christianity. The New Testament also envisions Christians bringing their friends to Christ through what can be considered relational, or friendship evangelism (see John 1:41-51, Acts 16:30-34). Both of these areas suggest that because Christianity is relational, Christian outreach should often also contain a strong relational aspect. We believe that in a postmodern culture, friendship evangelism and the subjective evidence of a caring Christian community are going to be more important than ever.

We already noted that postmodernism breeds profound loneliness. When postmodern people insist that everyone’s reality is different, they destroy any basis for closeness. Communication itself is of questionable value under postmodernism. When everyone’s opinion is of equal value, no opinion is of any value. The result? People have nothing to talk about. Respect may be distributed more fairly, but the postmodern definition of respect virtually requires the loss of closeness. With no basis for disagreement and debate, we drift into an apathy of indifference—a devastating price for our heightened respect.

“**We will never ‘nice’ someone into the kingdom of God. Groups who use their loving demeanor to bypass truth and decision-making are guilty of manipulating their hearers, rather than persuading them.”**

No wonder so many postmodern people are miserable, driven seekers of pleasure and meaning. Christians not only can explain why postmodernists have relational problems, but also show them a different way. We believe this is one of the most effective areas of Christian witness today. If we have even a small group of friends within a local church practicing Christian community, we have a base from which to practice evangelism. But remember: Even though the subjective witness of Christian love is important, it should supplement the truth of the Gospel, not replace it.

**What Is Love Bombing?**

A loving atmosphere is the ideal environment where truth can be considered with a favorable attitude. Christians will do well to form home groups where they can discuss truth rather than simply declare it, as in a sermon. However, we will never “nice” someone into the kingdom of God. Groups who use their loving demeanor to bypass truth and decision-making are guilty of manipulating their hearers, rather than persuading them.

Any time we try to win people to Christianity while bypassing their minds we are guilty of manipulation, an approach cult experts call “love-bombing.” A group that “love-bombs” makes an outward show of love in order to attract and even gain control over visitors. Guests may find themselves joining the group without even knowing why.
God doesn’t work this way. God may have stricken Paul down on the road to Damascus, but we aren’t authorized to do likewise. Our commission is to give a defense for the hope within us (1 Peter 3:15). We are to “declare the excellencies of” God (1 Peter 2:9). We are to “speak forth the mystery of Christ” while letting our “speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that we may know how to respond to each person” (Colossians 4:3, 6).

Consider the example of Paul. He spoke to a more or less nonrationalistic world similar to ours. With isolated exceptions, mainly in large Greek cities, the first-century world had little attraction to Western-style modernistic rationalism. Yet, Paul says, “Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Corinthians 5:11a).

Biblical Christians should hold forth both experience and reason when calling others to follow Christ.

Sailing Into the Future

As evangelicals sail off into an uncertain future, we have plenty of things to fear. Our children will be subjected to a program of social indoctrination that will challenge even the most careful parents. Our churches as well are embattled, perhaps in some cases even cowering before a world that seems too hostile to Christian ideals. Social institutions will likely continue to propagate postmodern and modernist views antithetical to Christianity. Laws and court interpretations will no doubt continue to cause problems as well.

What is the church to do?

We must advance! The power of God is great. Whatever the dangers we face when we actively engage our postmodern culture, the dangers of flight are greater still. Once we adopt a posture of flight, we guarantee defeat. A church on the defensive is a church without vision. The people of our culture today need us more than ever. But remember this: Our battle isn’t against flesh and blood (Ephesians 6:12). We have no war to fight with the people in our society. They are the victims of our true enemy, the Evil One. We cannot and should not construct fortress communities to protect ourselves from postmodernism. Only when we advance toward postmodernists in love do we develop the mental and spiritual fiber we need to live victoriously for God.

The Next Generation

We don’t protect our children merely by hiding them from the influence of postmodern ideology. They are only safe when they are familiar with postmodern arguments and are prepared to answer them confidently.

None of us who have children want them to die from drowning. But how can we prevent it? One way is to keep them away from bodies of water deeper than two feet. It works. Kids won’t drown if they don’t get into water. But, of course, we can also guard them from drowning by another method: teaching them to swim. Most of us choose this method. Though it isn’t foolproof, it works rather well and provides more freedom. Besides—do we really think we can keep our kids from ever in their lives falling into water too deep for wading? Even if we could, we would run the risk of turning them into social misfits.

This illustration suggests solutions for the problems we parents face in the postmodern world. God is explicit: He wants us to guard our children from drowning by teaching them to swim. For one thing, the other method—avoidance—is ineffective. Children eventually go away to college or into business and encounter all the things we guarded them from. Will they be ready?

We have one final reason to teach our kids to swim. Jesus said to the Father, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but to keep them from the Evil One” John 17:15). Paul said God doesn’t intend that Christians distance themselves from the wicked of this world (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Avoidance costs the lost people of the world the light they so desperately need.

In Brief

• Because of the loss of the Judeo-Christian undergirding of our society, evangelicals and culture stand at a greater distance from each other than in previous decades. The rise of postmodernism calls for cross-cultural communication, which is more demanding, more time-consuming, and more annoying to our flesh—but not impossible.

• Our reasons for optimism include the power of God, the loneliness of postmodern culture, postmodern nihilism, and a vacuum of truth.

• By discovering the presuppositions of others and gently leading them to discover the problems with their own views, we can thaw the dogmatism of postmodern consensus and create a new openness to alternatives.

• We must be prepared to speak the truth and resist the temptation to merely try to take people to a higher pleasure state than their earlier postmodern options could.

• We can also use subjective forms of witness to good effect if they are legitimate and subordinate to the truth. Foremost among these is authentic Christian love.

As we move forward to engage postmodern culture in dialogue, we know we have God’s power, the truth, and our love for lost and needy people to buoy us up. May God enable us to move forward...
not with fear but with excitement about what we have to share.

[Editor’s Note: This article was excerpted from *The Death of Truth* (Bethany House Publishers, 1996), Chapter 15, entitled “Practical Communication Ideas.”]

Notes
2. I don’t believe this argument applies to young children. We can make a good case for protection at ages where children cannot reasonably be expected to think for themselves. If we are wise, however, we will even then work to train them for the day when we introduce them to the rest of life.

**Conversation & Cuisine**

**A Unique Evangelistic Outreach**

The Xenos Christian Fellowship has developed an evangelistic outreach called Conversation and Cuisine which members of Xenos have used successfully for years. The C&C strategy is designed to be pre-evangelistic—a first exposure to Christian ideas for adults. The outreach is built around a dinner party and after-dinner discussion led by a facilitator. Please contact the Xenos Christian Fellowship for more information on how to host a C&C event at your home with colleagues and neighbors. Contact them at: 1340 Community Park Drive, Columbus, OH 43229; (614) 823-6500; http://www.xenos.org.