

The Postmodern Turn
The Christian Faith and Contemporary Challenges
March 28, 2021

“The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.” – Prov 4:18

I. Introduction: The Currents of Our Time

A. The Headwaters: The Enlightenment and the “Turn to the Subject”

1. *“The autonomous man of [Immanuel] Kant says ‘I am’ and allows nothing more ultimate than itself. The Christian says ‘I am’ in terms of Christ and God as the great I AM.” – Cornelius Van Til*

B. Three Major Streams: Modern Responses to Kant’s “Turn to the Subject”

1. SUPPLEMENT Reason: The “Expressive Individual” of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)
2. REVIVE Reason: The “Social Individual” of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) and Karl Marx (1818–1883)
3. REJECT Reason: The “Self-Created” Individual of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

II. Postmodernism: What is it? (What a terribly “modern” question!)

- A. Definition: An ideological and cultural reaction, begun in the 1960’s, against the intellectual movement known as “modernism,” together with its assumptions. It rejects the hubris of rational autonomy and our alleged access to objective reality, and asserts instead the socially constructed (through language!) character of all knowledge, morality, and “truth” claims.

- B. Major Figures (for our purposes): Early on, French theorists such as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), and Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998)

1. Lyotard on Postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarrative”

“The metanarrative has lost its credibility ... regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.”

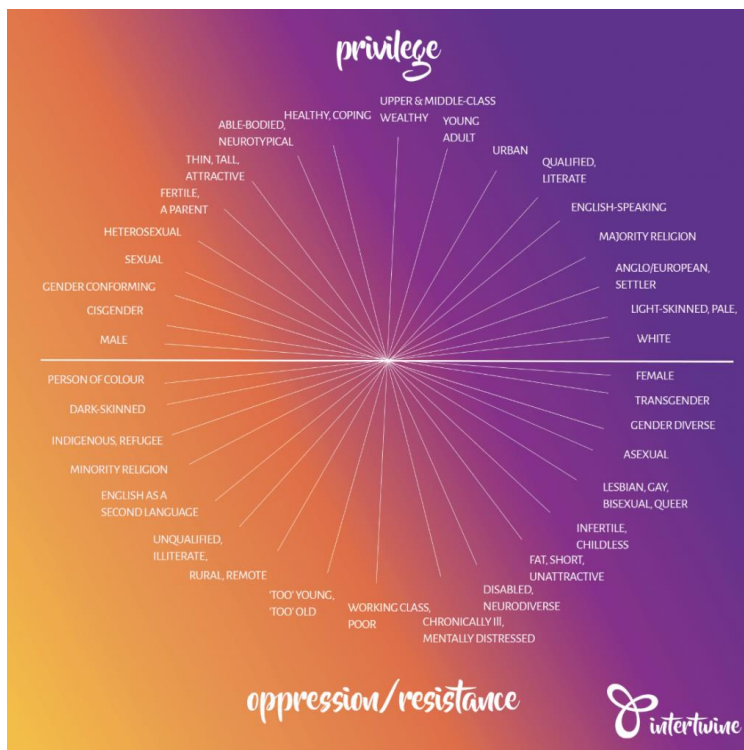
– J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 37

C. Major Influences

1. Art and Humanities: From art with a transcendent purpose and set genres (medieval) to “art for art’s sake” (M) to art that is impersonal, anti-elitist, and playful (PM).
2. Architecture: From “form follows function” (M) vs. playful eclecticism (PM)
3. Society and Economics: From industrialization/bureaucratization for a productive society (M) to the business of entertainment and leisure (PM)
4. Philosophy and Education: From a pursuit of certainty (M) to dialogue and identity development (PM)
5. Literature and Interpretation: From exploring authorial intent and the referential power of the text (M) to a “hermeneutic of suspicion” and deconstruction (PM)

III. “Applied” Postmodernism

- A. Whereas early postmodernism was largely *descriptive* and simply asserted a radical skepticism concerning objective knowledge, “applied” postmodernism is *prescriptive* and seeks expose and disrupt the power dynamics embedded in dominant systems (Foucault: “epistemes”) of ideas and values.
- B. The “Critical” Assumption: Now that everything is socially constructed, largely through language, all systems of ideas and language that perpetuate unjust power-privileges of some groups over other groups must be analyzed, exposed, and overturned.
- C. One Charity’s “Wheel of Oppression”¹:



“As human beings, we exist in a multitude of spaces and identities. We experience ourselves as people situated in a culture, we understand ourselves through a sense of gender and sexuality, we move within the physical and social worlds with varying degrees of ease.”

“As people working in progressive organisations, we see the intersection of systems of oppression as an additional burden upon those they affect and acknowledge that this intersection can reproduce violence.” (Intertwine Charter)

IV. Thinking With a Biblical Lens ...

A. Modernism

1. What are some “common grace insights” of the modern period and modern themes?
2. How does a biblical worldview challenge the assumptions of modernism and its themes?

¹ “Intertwine” is “a registered charity with a mission to dismantle the systemic power structures that create marginalisation and oppression, through education, building bridges among communities and organisations, and fostering resilience, intersectional inclusion and empowerment.” <https://intertwine.net.au/about/> (accessed March 25, 2021).

“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”
(Rom 1:20–21)

B. Postmodernism / Applied Postmodernism

1. What are some “common grace insights” of the postmodernism and its themes?
2. How does a biblical worldview challenge the assumptions of postmodernism and its themes?

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1–2)