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SBJT: What positive things can be said about postmodernism?

D. A. Carson: The question is important, since many Christians of conservative stamp have given the impression that postmodernism is entirely evil, and begin to act as if a knee-jerk reversion to modernism is a good thing. They forget, perhaps, that modernism has not always proved a stalwart friend of confessional Christianity. It is surely a better thing to recognize that both modernism and postmodernism include some elements with

which thoughtful Christians may happily align themselves, and some elements with which they strongly disagree.

So that we are all on the same page, I should specify what I mean by "modernism" and "postmodernism." For the purposes of these reflections, I am referring to competing approaches of epistemology. Modernist epistemology begins with the finite "I," is convinced of the power of autonomous reason, is profoundly foundationalist, and holds to both the desirability and the accessibility of objective truth. It strives for universal truth, for truth characterized by ahistorical universality, and it governs its proceedings by heavy dependence on controlled methods.

Postmodern epistemology also begins with the finite "I," but finds this finite "I" to be a barrier to knowledge of objective reality. Profoundly suspicious of foundationalism and convinced that a multiplicity of methods breeds a rich multiplicity of perspectives, it denies that objective truth is accessible, and doubts that it is desirable.

Thoughtful Christians should buy into neither epistemology. The dangers and weaknesses of postmodern epistemology have been catalogued elsewhere. But its strengths are at least four:

(1) It grasps the entailments of human finiteness; it recognizes that, precisely because we begin with the finite "I," our foundations, like our methods, our speech, our perspectives, our cultural limitations, our assumptions, are constraints that we cannot escape. Christians will surely want to applaud this. In fact, in one crucial respect, we will go farther than the postmoderns. We insist not only on human finiteness, but also on the noetic effects of the fall. Our minds, we insist, are not only small and limited, but

also corrupt and self-serving.

(2) The most effective critique of modernist arrogance during the past thirty years has surely been postmodern epistemology. We may not like the conclusions postmodernism draws from this, and we will certainly want to critique postmoderns in turn, but we are grateful for the attack on modernist arrogance. Postmodernism does not really point the epistemological way forward; for those with eyes to see, it does effectively condemn the way we have been.

(3) In some ways, postmodernism is confirmed by various facets of our experience, and in turn illumines our experience. When I think and talk and write, I do so as a middle-aged, white, Canadian, male. I do not look at things exactly the way my sister in Christ does who is black, poor, elderly, unschooled, and from (say) Alabama; or as my brother does who is young, black, well-educated, privileged, and the head of a major institution in Kenya.

For several years, I organized study groups for the World Evangelical Fellowship. My brief was to bring together confessing evangelical thinkers from many difference races, from various denominations and countries, to work on assigned topics. Most of us had had reasonably good to excellent training; all of us held to the view that the Scriptures as originally given are God's inerrant Word. Yet the differences that surfaced when we gathered together were fascinating. These differences extended beyond forms of arguments (e.g., the Germans and Norwegians were direct and forthright; the Japanese were courteous and circumlocutory). For instance, when dealing with many texts in Paul, North Americans instantly tended to think of individualistic interpre-

tations and applications; black Africans from south of the Sahara tended to think in terms of communal interpretations and applications. The differences prompted all of us to re-examine our presuppositions, our cultural biases. In the past, many thought that the best-educated white Westerners were naturally most likely to be right; and if we ourselves were not right, then at least our approach to all questions was fundamentally right. Experience is teaching us a little humility, and postmodernism is helping with the instruction. I cannot say I am displeased. In an age where we have become more aware than ever before of the global church, there are things here for which to be grateful. (Of course, the most consistent postmodernists would say that all of our differing interpretations were equally "right" or "wrong": there is no particular value in attempting to reach consensus, they would say, for even that consensus would be nothing more than one more opinion from one more interpretative group. I cannot agree, of course but my purpose here is not to respond to postmodernism's errors, but to voice gratitude for the places it is right.)

(4) Similarly, postmodernism has insisted, rightly, that there are different ways of learning and knowing. That was sometimes grudgingly admitted a little earlier, but intellectual leaders often powerfully articulated preference for foundationalism, linear thinking, and methodological control. Some domains of thought, I would argue, are particularly well suited to such approaches. But some are not. Very often there are intuitive "leaps" that depend in no small measure on such things as cultural background, experience, prior reading, maturity, and grief. As we reflect on the people we know

who have become Christians as adults, how many of them closed with Christ primarily out of a linear, logical, cerebral pursuit of truth?

I am not arguing for irrationality. To study the evangelistic sermons of Paul (for instance) is to think through how to address diverse cultures with the universals of the universal gospel, what Jude calls the gospel once for all delivered to the saints. We are to give reasons to everyone who asks us about the hope we have in Christ. Nevertheless, human experience is so complex, and the workings of the Spirit so powerful and hard to analyze (reflect on 1 Cor 2:6-16), that we soon tumble to the fact that few men and women come to a true knowledge of Christ in a straight epistemological line.

Does not Scripture itself tell us that people will know we are Christ's disciples by our love (John 13:34-35)? How many secular, postmodern young people today are first attracted to our better churches by the sheer authenticity of the corporate worship and of the human relationships found in our churches? They sometimes think of what they see as "spirituality"—a notoriously slippery word. At the least, they are seeing spiritual authenticity, the authentic fruit of the Spirit of God. Such experience by itself does not articulate the gospel, of course; but articulations of the gospel apart from the witness of transformed living often strike post-moderns as remarkably sterile, inauthentic, and "unspiritual." And insofar as postmodernism calls us to recognize the complexities of human knowing, it is a welcome relief to the reductionisms of modernism.