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J. Richard Middleton , Brian J. Walsh

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Voted one of Christianity Today's 1996 Books of the Year! The carnivalesque, pluralistic culture in which we live can be seen as a consequence of the breakdown of modernity (which touted itself as the "greatest show on earth"), combined with a recognition of the socially constructed character of reality. Since the old construction has been discredited and is in a process of decomposition, the season is open on the construction of new realities which are produced with the speed and ease of temporary circus tents being raised. Far from witnessing the erosion or even eclipse of religious belief that the Enlightenment so confidently predicted, the eclipse of the Enlightenment has resulted in a veritable smorgasbord of religions and worldviews for our consumption. So Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh colorfully describe our postmodern setting. In this book they survey postmodern culture and philosophy, offering lucid explanations of such difficult theories as deconstruction. They are sympathetic to the postmodern critique, yet believe that a gospel stripped of its modernist trappings speaks a radical word of hope and transformation to our chaotic culture. The book for those who wonder what postmodernism is and how biblical Christians might best respond.

Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age Details

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Jon Sherwood says

An academic and somewhat dense read, but an excellent resource on postmodernism and its influence on our faith. I would highly recommend everyone who can access it, to read this!

Ray Wilkins says

The book is a bit dated but still offers a good critique of postmodernity. I appreciate the authors viewing postmodernity through the lens of worldview. This allows the reader to see how postmoderns seek to answer life's most important questions. They also accurately reflect upon the criticisms of modernity by the postmodern world.

What we are left with is a de-centered self that is homeless in the cosmos. The authors response to the postmodern critique is to reassess the Christian worldview through an epistemology they call "covenant epistemology." The reader, they argue, must see the world as a given and themselves as covenant partners in living out the drama of creation. Rather than simply interpret the Bible from outside, we must indwell the story so that it becomes ours. While the authors are to be commended for their re-evaluation of a Christian worldview in light of postmodern criticism, I am not convinced that "covenant epistemology" can live in harmony with an objective biblical authority.

René says

This was a required text for my World Views: Human Beliefs & Human Actions class.

There were quite a few high points in this book that made it worthwhile. It framed the Biblical metanarrative in a positive light and it helped to explain the way the story of Scripture continues on within the church today.

The difficult part was that it was just too long. This was mainly because the authors couldn't seem to describe anything succinctly. It was tiring.

Joel Wentz says

Read 'Truth is Stranger' for its incredible and lucid diagnosis of our "cultural moment." Particularly if you are a Gen X or Baby Boomer, you will probably find Walsh and Middleton to be helpful and gracious guides into the seeming chaos of the 'postmodern' times. The first half of the book is composed of this diagnosis, and I predict that I will be going back to this many times in the future.

The second half of the book, while still helpful, is not quite as superb. In this, Walsh and Middleton attempt a "biblically-grounded" response to the postmodern movement. They propose a sensitive use of the Bible as

a 'metanarrative' over and against the narratives swirling around our culture, as well as a theology of 'imago dei' to empower the identity of self that has been demolished under postmodernism. This is all really helpful, and most importantly, I appreciate the nuance they bring to the discussion. Without nit-picking regarding their conclusions, I think the attempt is extremely valuable, and I can highly recommend "Truth is Stranger" as an example of how to wade into this important discussion.

Jacob Aitken says

This book was one of the earliest salvos into the postmodern situation, at least from a semi-"conservative" Christian position. The authors (hereafter MW) highlight the collapse of the "modern" project, examine the postmodern response, and then offer their own Christian response. In terms of structure and outline, the book is formed in a chiasmic pattern. This is a move of sheer genius on the authors' part.

MW call attention to legitimate postmodern critiques of the modern project (the latter which they date roughly from the time of the Renaissance until now). Modernism, which is usually--rightly or wrongly--defined as a variant of Western liberal capitalism, sought a narrative which gave a universal legitimization of Modernity's goal. For example, modernity--however defined--saw itself as the culmination of humanity's story and progress (big oversimplification, but fair enough). Postmodern thinkers--and even Christian premoderns--pointed out that any story they told was always conditioned by a certain community at a certain moment in history. "We can never get outside our knowledge to check it against objective reality" (MW 32). Further, this metanarrative is shown to be a highly contingent one which serves to legitimate power (a common, if overdone postmodern refrain). MW then continue with a lucid description of key postmodern thinkers.

The next sections highlight the postmodern flux of decentered selves and unconnected narratives. The endnotes to these sections are particularly valuable, as they give pointed critiques to key postmodern thinkers.

The Scriptural Response

The book should have ended before this point. Their diagnosis of the postmodern situation was masterful. Their response was terrible. Well, it's terrible only in the particulars. Against the postmodern suspicion of metanarratives, MW offers the biblical metanarrative. For anyone who is familiar with covenant theology, this is familiar ground. But MW is quick to point out that the biblical metanarrative does not legitimize power structures, but shows us the one who divested Himself of power.

Against the postmodern decentered self, they give us the empowered self. MW then proceeds with a succinct summary of the imago dei as ruling image bearers. Pretty good stuff.

Some Problems

While the narrational thrust of the book is wonderful (and there are many helpful vignettes scattered throughout), the particulars are so bad, if not dangerous, that I cannot really recommend this book.

Never escapes modernism: Ironically, given their wonderful expose of modernity and their summation of postmodernity, I don't think the authors are aware of just how modern their application is. There are the standard leftist litanties (pp. 37, 90, 192) that bemoan capitalism, destruction of the environment, and racism. Certainly there are legitimate concerns here, but I can't help but notice how "abstract" these causes are. Modernity deals in abstractions, they rightly note, but do they not see how they, too, are championing

abstractions? Their litanies, so to speak, are no different from the New York Times editorial section, that flagship of Empire.

Sin defined as oppression: Unless I missed it, they never defined sin as a violation of God's law, but usually as an outworking of oppressive power structures and Empire. The problem with creation, so they reason, is that we are enabling the oppression of the marginalized (usually defined as tenured feminists). So why do we need a savior? Well, we need one because he brings up the integrated wholeness of shalom (162). There is a dangerous half-truth here. Jesus does bring in shalom and I love how they defined shalom. That's just not my biggest problem in life.

Surrendering the field to feminists:

The saddest irony, though, is for all of their vaunted "narrative-ness," they seem incapable of knowing how a story "works." They end the book with a discussion of Phyllis Trible's Text of Terror. The question is a legitimate (pun?) one: if the narrative of Scripture is so great as narrative, then what do we do with those narratives that seem to offer violence to the marginalized, often sexual violence?

And like true Evangelicals, they quailed before the challenge. With regard to the Tamar narrative, they note that what is condemned is "the affront to male power-holders and not to 'inferior' women" (177). This is the stupidest thing I have ever read in my life. Is the text really saying this? Of course not. In fact, Tamar's story must be seen within the larger Davidic narrative and that larger narrative shows that the crime is symptomatic of a deeper problem. In no way does that justify crime. It's simply a "more narrational" reading of the problem.

Conclusion

This book is good and successful on many fronts. Unfortunately, where it is wrong it is badly wrong and one is hard-pressed to recommend it.

Fr. says

I first read this years ago and started rereading because I want to get back up to speed before writing a critique on why modern apologetics hasn't worked and isn't working.

Brett says

What does it mean to be a Christian in a postmodern context? Middleton and Walsh approach this question with clarity and grace. Divided into two sections, the text examines both postmodern thought (Derrida and the gang) and a Christian response. In all, a good introduction and balanced response to postmodernism, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* helps shape a postmodern Christianity. B+

Lawrence Feriozzi says

Read this when it first came out in 97, good primer for postmodernism at the time. Influenced my thought on integration of PM with my faith.

Douglas Wilson says

Godforsaken.

Raphael Haeuser says

A must read!

Courtney Jepson says

Read for extra on notes for Faith and Contemporary...semester2

Matt says

Not necessarily dealing with postmodern culture as much as postmodern philosophy. A little redundant in places. Dealt with human sinfulness in OT, but never addressed God's wrath.
