

Dear Mr. Colson,

I just read your column in Christianity Today, "The Postmodern Crackup: From soccer moms to college campuses, signs of the end" (December 2003, p. 72). I normally wouldn't try to respond to a piece like this for at least four reasons:

- 1) Many of the people who think they understand postmodernism and write or speak about it lack the time, energy, or historical and philosophical understanding to begin to understand what they don't understand about it, so it's fruitless to even try to dialogue with them. It's better just to let things slide.
- 2) In the big scheme of things, their misunderstandings don't matter that much.
- 3) I know there are so many things I don't understand myself, and whether my opinions are right or wrong, they don't matter much either way.
- 4) Religious debate can be a lot like pornography, drug abuse, and gambling: stupid yet attractive and potentially addictive, and therefore dangerous spiritually.

"Just this once" is a dangerous thing to say (in pornography, gambling, drug use, or debate). But I guess I'm saying it, because 1) you have always impressed me as a thoughtful brother in Christ, and I believe you are more capable than many of better understanding the issues surrounding postmodernity than many of your colleagues, 2) because your public stature means that if you had a better understanding, you could do a lot more good than you're currently doing, and 3) because ... well, because I feel somebody needs to respond to your article, and I apparently lack the humility to realize how unqualified I am to do so.

Perhaps this recollection would help you understand why I'm taking this gamble. Several years back, you tried to bring Evangelicals and Catholics together, an effort which I applaud and in which I am involved myself. Some Protestants were so filled with prejudice against Catholics that they couldn't see any good in what you were doing, in spite of our Lord's teachings on being peacemakers, and they launched rather vicious attacks on you. I imagine you wished your critics would better understand what you were trying to do so they would stop doing harm to your good cause.

I don't know if you ever wrote a response to them as I'm trying to do now, but my friends and I who are currently engaging with issues of postmodernity wish you could better understand what we're trying to do. Sadly, what you wrote in this recent column, along with other things you have written along similar lines, feels unhelpful to us much the way the criticisms of "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" must have felt to you some years ago. Back then, you saw some things your critics didn't see about Evangelical engagement with Roman Catholics, and I think we see some things you don't about engagement with postmodern people and their questions.

In your column, you pronounced "postmodernism" dead, or on life support, or at least losing strength. You're kind of right, because the kind of postmodernism you describe – "the philosophy that claims there is no transcendent truth" – was never really alive. It's a straw man, Chuck, a bugaboo not unlike Hillary Clinton's "vast right-wing conspiracy," used to create fear, galvanize sympathy and support, and perhaps raise money. (Everyone knows how a good enemy is a fundraiser's best friend.)

What you describe as postmodernism – a claim that "there is no such thing as truth," a rejection of all moral values, or their reduction to mere preferences – may have been purported by a few crazed graduate students for a few minutes at a late-night drinking party. But to paint the whole movement with that brush is inaccurate. That kind of guilt-by-association would be like lumping you as a political conservative in with all the conservative wackos in Idaho who stockpile weapons and whisper about black helicopters and blame 9/11 on President Bush – after all, they're against the "liberals" just like you. Or it would be like lumping us (you and me) as Christians in with the Branch Davidians (we all quote the Bible, eh?) or the wackos who blame 9/11 on the ACLU (we all pray, don't we?). Those who live by hacking straw men with the sword will probably be rendered straw men by others, I think, and be hacked by the same childish logic. I hope in the future you'll be more careful in this regard. (Some Branch Davidians – if there are any left – probably feel I was less than careful in the previous sentences.)

I can only assume your column takes this simplistic approach because you've been unaware of the rest of the story of what's going on in the postmodern transition. I'm hoping that by writing this response, you'll begin to realize that there's more going on than you've realized, so in the future, your engagement can be more responsible and helpful.

I can agree with you that the "no transcendent truth" kind of postmodernism is dead, because as I said, it never was very alive. At most, it was an early, reactionary phase in a yet-embryonic movement that has much more mature, constructive, and positive voices emerging. Like you, I've spent a lot of time talking with college students and other thoughtful postmoderns. In fact, before entering pastoral ministry, I was a college English instructor – and as you know, English departments were the hotbed of postmodern thought back in the 70's and 80's. But I must tell you: I've never heard anyone articulate as their belief what you consistently assert that postmoderns believe. Sure, many college freshmen will resort to extreme statements when they're approached by an angry Christian waving the sword of "absolute truth," but if you (and George Barna and others) understood what they think you mean by "absolute truth," you'd understand why they react as they do. Nobody likes having a sword waved at them!

I understand that you are reacting against something that's really dangerous, and perhaps under those circumstances, a little hyperbole is excusable. Besides, I realize that a one-page column or short radio broadcast might require some ... I won't say "dumbing down," but I will say "simplification." Anyway, I fully agree with you that if people are advocating no morality, no ethics, no reality, well, that's a truly pathetic and dangerous situation. Those kinds of people need medication, or hospitalization, or perhaps incarceration – at least a good vacation. But again, Chuck, even though people like you say that's what "postmoderns" in general advocate, I've still not met any serious postmodern spokespeople themselves say what you say that they say. Even Jacques Derrida, a favorite whipping boy of modern critics, has been very clear to say that justice cannot be deconstructed. If you really understood these people you're critiquing, you'd realize that they are driven in part at least – as you are – by a desire to fight against injustice.

But in the process of being against something worth being against (for you, moral relativism, for them, atrocities perpetrated by powerful elites), it's possible to become for something not worth being for. That's what I perceive to be happening – both among you and many Evangelical leaders of your generation and the extreme "postmoderns" you critique.

In fact, by reflecting on how you feel about "postmoderns" and what you think they stand for and against, you can begin to understand how real postmodern people feel about Christians like us, and things they think we stand for ... things like "metanarratives." That term, by the way, is a highly nuanced term. This isn't the time to go into a lengthy exploration of the term (you can find a good reading list or two on this and related subjects at www.emergentvillage.com), but let me offer this analogy. The word propaganda is defined as follows:

1. The systematic propagation of a doctrine or cause or of information reflecting the views and interests of those advocating such a doctrine or cause.
2. Material disseminated by the advocates or opponents of a doctrine or cause: wartime propaganda.

Based on this definition, would you want to define the gospel as propaganda? The definition fits, right? But you wouldn't want to use this word for the gospel, because the word carries negative connotations – connotations related to half-truths, manipulative rhetoric, suppressed counter-information, etc. Similarly, metanarrative implies domination, coercion, eradication of opponents, imposition of beliefs or behaviors on minorities against their will, and the like. Many people don't realize these connotations are associated with the term, because they've gotten their information from others in the Christian community who have never really understood or even read the primary source documents. While I'm sure you do not fall into this category, it seems to me that you have not really grasped the meaning of metanarrative as it's used by postmodern theorists. It's easy to misunderstand, in part because of the density of postmodern philosophical writing, but more because of the confused propaganda disseminated by too many of our not-fully-informed Christian brothers on the subject.

Having said that, I still understand that you are against something worth being against. You feel that postmoderns have developed a self-contradictory message (THIS IS THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH: there are no absolute truths!). This absurdity might allow them to do anything they want in the name of no absolutes (which to you means “no morality”). You know that if they pursue that path of moral anarchy, the personal and social result will be terrible pain and destruction – AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, divorce, and more. You want to save them and others from this pain. This is a good thing, and I applaud you for it, and I share your concern!

But try to understand this parallel reality: In the late 20th century, postmodern thinkers looked back at regimes like Stalin’s and Hitler’s. (One must never forget how postmodern thought developed in the aftermath of the Holocaust, as deeply ethical European intellectuals like Michael Polanyi reflected on the atrocities their peers had perpetuated or acquiesced to.) Postmodern thinkers realized that these megalomaniacs used grand systems of belief to justify their atrocities. Those systems of belief – which the postmodern thinkers called “metanarratives,” but which also could have been called “world views” or “ideologies” – were so powerful they could transform good European intellectuals into killers or accomplices. They thought back over European history and realized (as C. S. Lewis did) that those who have passionate commitment to a system of belief will be most willing, not only to die for it, but to kill for it.

They looked at powerful belief systems of the twentieth century – world views (extreme Marxism is one such world view), grand stories (anti-Semitism is one such story, White Supremacy is another, American manifest destiny is another), ideologies (such as the industrialist ideology that the earth and its resources are not God’s creation deserving care through reverential stewardship, but rather, are simply natural resources there for the taking by secular industrialists), and they were horrified. These dominating belief systems were responsible for so many millions of deaths, so much torture, so much loss of freedom and dignity, so much damage to the planet, that they sought to undermine their dominance. They advocated incredulity or skepticism toward such stories or belief systems.

By the way, you repeatedly referred to 9/11 as a watershed in this regard, but it seems to me the “metanarrative” of the Taliban and radical Islamists simply adds another reason for incredulity or skepticism towards belief systems which seek control by force or intimidation, don’t you agree? And rightly or wrongly, the U.S. action in Iraq may convince many people around the world that we’re just another powerful elite bent on domination, coercion, and elimination of our opponents through a messianic metanarrative of American Empire. So 9/11 may not mark a return to the good old days of modernity after all, at least not outside our borders, and not for long.

Anyway, Chuck, you’re legitimately worried that “postmoderns” will use their relativism as an excuse to do anything they want. But they’re worried that you and other “moderns” will use your absolutism as an excuse to do anything you want. (If you can’t see any validity to their concern, then I’m truly speechless, and it’s hardly worth your reading the rest of my letter.) From where I stand, I’m afraid both of you are seeing a valid danger in one another. Postmodern people like me – you can call us post-postmoderns if you want to continue asserting postmodernity is dead, but please don’t call us truth-denying relativists, because we’re not, even though we don’t like your unreflective use of words like “absolute truth” – people like me want neither the self-indulgent narcissism of the one nor the unreflective absolutism of the other. You’re against their supposed denial of truth in the interest of self-indulgence, and they’re against your apparent monopolization of truth in the interest of political domination, and you’ve convinced some of the rest of us that you’re both at least partly right about each other.

I hope you can see that this thoughtful concern can’t be reduced to the absurd assertion that there is truly no such thing as “truth.” Again, some postmodern people may overreact and say absurd things from time to time – but what they say in overreaction doesn’t look a lot different to me from what you say in your CT column – especially when I consider that Christian writers like us should be held to a higher standard of care for the truth.

About truth: I wish that you and some of your colleagues in religious broadcasting could be treated to a few off-the-air moments of thoughtful reflection on the word truth that you use so often. If truth matters as much as you say it does (and I know it does), and if words are important in the conveyance of truth (as we both know they are –

otherwise, why write?), we need to think carefully about the word truth itself. What do you mean when you say it? Has the word become a club used without content to batter opponents, as “patriotism” and “tolerance” are used by conservatives and liberals in the political arena? As I reflect on this, I think truth means at least seven very different things depending on the context:

1. Reality – Sometimes, we use truth to mean “what’s out there,” or “what’s really, really, real.”
2. A human perception of reality – Sometimes we use the term to mean how an individual human or group of humans perceive what’s really out there. For example, in court, when a person swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we understand only God could fulfill that promise, unless we defined truth to mean “an honest and full accounting of what you perceived.”
3. Knowledge about reality - Clearly, there’s always some degree of difference between #2 and #1 above, and when we weave our perceptions into coherent, conscious generalizations and call those generalizations knowledge, the difference isn’t erased. In other words, reality as seen and known by our infinite and wonderful God is always fuller and to some degree different than reality as seen and known by limited, situated humans. Scripture affirms this, reminding us that we know only in part.
4. Statements or propositions about reality – When we take our knowledge, which arises in the context of our imperfect perceptions about what’s really out there, and then we share that knowledge with others in statements, we have to admit we add new layers of imprecision – through the wonderful but sometimes imprecise interplay of encoded, sent, received, and interpreted symbols we call language. Human statements clearly do some justice to the realities they describe, but if even half of my critique of your column (an attempt to make true statements about reality, I don’t doubt) is valid, you have to admit that our very best attempts to make true statements about reality still aren’t perfect. For example, do you believe, looking back, that all the statements in your column were perfectly, completely, absolutely, objectively true? If you give anything less than an unqualified “yes,” you are being sensitive to the same concerns postmodern people have about these matters.
5. Moral or ethical judgments – The situation becomes even more complex when our statements are judgments about moral or ethical behavior. Even for those of use who claim to know God and have faith in the Bible: we need to look back over our own history and realize that just as there are disastrous consequences to claiming there is no such thing as legitimate moral judgment, there are also disastrous consequences to claiming that we have unquestionably legitimate moral judgment. Our ancestors judged slavery as morally justified, and brought in Scripture to enforce their point; we now judge slavery wrong, also using Scripture. Are we so naïve to think that all our judgments are finally right, just because we quote the Bible?
6. A belief system or world view – I think that the concept of world view is very powerful. And for that reason, it can be very dangerous. For example, I suspect that for many religious broadcasters and writers, “The Christian World View” means “The Modern Western Christian World View” or “The Calvinist Systematic Theology” or “A Syncretism of Christian Theology and Conservative Republican Politics,” but neither they nor their listeners realize it. Anyway, there’s a lot of mystique and fog around the term. Adding the words “The” and “Christian” in front of a worldview doesn’t guarantee this worldview is now 100% in synch with #1 above, but it sure can give that impression to unreflective people reading a column in Christianity Today, especially if they’re already feeling intimidated and afraid by all the changes in our world, and are hoping for reassurance.
7. A feeling of certainty – When some people use the word truth, I think they mean a feeling of certainty, security, and rest that means they no longer have to think or ask questions. In other words, truth means “case closed.” This exemption from further thought is something we all desire at times, I think, especially after a long hard day of reading a column in CT and criticizing it (and then criticizing the critique). But one only has to talk to a person hospitalized for psychosis to realize that a feeling of certainty can have very little in common with #1 above!

I bring up these complexities not to “deny truth,” and not because I don’t care about truth, but because I do – believing that the pursuit of truth means being faithful to #1 above. My desire to be faithful to reality/truth (an indispensable facet of my desire to be faithful to the true and living God) requires me to face the complexities of how people in reality use the word truth in these differing ways. If that’s not complex enough, then people start adding modifiers like “absolute” and “objective” and “subjective” and “relative” – and they seldom realize the even greater complexity and unspoken philosophical freight that goes along with these terms. I’m afraid your column reinforces the most simplistic (mis)understandings of these issues.

If the relativism you rightly attack is as great a danger as you believe it to be (and I think it is!), then the simplistic critique you're giving is not an adequate solution. (If you're prone to reread sentences, the previous one might warrant a rereading; I know I'm tempted to repeat it for emphasis.)

Years ago, a colleague of yours was asked about postmodern thought. He replied that it should be opposed at all costs. When asked why, he replied, "Because it destroys our apologetic." I thought about him, then, and you, now, the same way: "Thank God he's over 55. He can afford to think the postmodern culture can be opposed. He can afford to stick with the status quo apologetic." But for those of us who are either younger or more engaged with the true issues of postmodernity (in which sense was I using the word true in the previous clause?), we can't afford that luxury.

The postmodern culture is the world in which many of us live and work and minister, sharing the good news and following the good ways of Jesus Christ. The old modern apologetic simply doesn't work for us, or our children, or their friends. It's not just that it doesn't work: I'm not just being pragmatic. The modern apologetic doesn't even address the questions that are being raised. So for us, the hard questions raised by real, thoughtful postmodern people (not the cartoon caricatures you present in this column) require good answers, and those answers require better, deeper, more careful, less simplistic thinking than you provided in your column, or in your other writings I have read on this subject, as good as they are in many other ways.

You may find a thousand flaws in my thinking, Chuck, but I hope you'll give these matters a second thought, and I hope you'll pray for me and others rather than portraying all "postmoderns" as cartoons, because with all our flaws, at least we're trying to deal with a world you apparently don't understand and hope is just going to crack up and go away. If it doesn't crack up and go away, you'll be glad some of us took it more seriously and engaged it more thoughtfully for the sake of the gospel.

You suggest that Christians who don't share your views are "dumbing down" and moving from a "Word-driven message" to an "image and emotion-driven message." True, there's plenty of dumbing down out there, but I'm sorry, that blanket assessment is not worthy of a person of your stature. Rather, many of us are trying to escape the dumbed-down understandings of current issues that you and too many others unintentionally purvey. We believe that image (the language of imagination) and emotion (including the emotion of wonder) are essential elements of fully human knowing, and thus we seek to integrate them in our search for this precious, wonderful, sacred gift called truth, which you and I both love – and too often betray in spite of our best intentions.

Your column concluded like this: "It would be the supreme irony – and a terrible tragedy – if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end." I'm tempted to point out the irony that some Christians like yourself seem to be more deeply entrenching themselves in "modernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end." Aside from noting the needed distinctions between a) postmodernity as a broad cultural movement (including, as all cultural currents do, contradictory counter-currents and wacko extremes) – which is alive and kickin', and b) postmodernism as you define it (an extreme cartoonish position few if any responsible people would claim as their own – which is fine to pronounce a dead end, since it never had much of a beginning), and c) postmodernism as I and others understand it (a far more broad and nuanced philosophical turn that begins beyond both high modern absolutism/positivism and late-modern/early-postmodern relativism) ... aside from noting these distinctions, I do want to end on two points of agreement.

1. Neither you nor I think that postmodernity or modernity is "the answer." Rather, we both believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to salvation – for the modern and the postmodern alike. Like you, I think, I am at heart an evangelist. Just as you and your good colleagues in Prison Fellowship have spent decades now entering the tough world of prisons for the sake of the gospel, many of us are entering the challenging arena of postmodern culture. Many people think of prisoners as worthless good-for-nothings, but your evangelistic heart and personal experience won't let you reach that dismissive conclusion. I believe you can understand when I tell you I feel the same way about my friends and neighbors in postmodern culture as you feel about prisoners. I love them. I seek to treat them with gentleness and respect when they ask me the reasons for the hope I have in Christ. Maybe you

could think about me and others like me as “Postmodern Fellowship,” a sister organization to Prison Fellowship, seeking to bring the good news of Jesus to a forgotten, sometimes despised, often misunderstood population.

2. I share your sadness about the state of many Christian radio stations. Some stations are converting, you lamented, from “preaching and talk” to “all music.” Actually, I’m glad that there will be less religious-broadcaster-style rhetoric on the air – of which I find your columns and broadcasts to be better-than-average examples, by the way. I’m just sad that most of the music on Christian radio isn’t much better than the preaching and talk. The gospel deserves better preaching and better music than we produce.

And it deserves better writing and thought than either you or I have achieved, in your column or in this response. But at least we’re trying, both of us, all of us. May God help us grow. We have a long way to go.

I know you’re a busy man doing many good things, and may never have time to read this. But if you do, please don’t feel any pressure to reply. I’m sure I’ve misunderstood and misspoken in many ways, and as I said, I’m not very skilled at debate, nor do I want to get practice. In spite of my lack of qualifications and my many faults (known and unknown), I sincerely hope that some of my responses to your column here will be of help to you (or your staff) in some small way in your continuing and important work for Christ and his Kingdom.

Your brother in Christ,
Brian McLaren
Emergentvillage.com
Anewkindofchristian.com

Chuck Colson's Response

To Brian McLaren
From Chuck Colson
February 2004

I've just had an opportunity to read fully your interesting response to my column in Christianity Today. I appreciate very much the loving and constructive spirit in which you write, and also your encouraging remarks about my ministry, particularly my work with Evangelicals and Catholics Together.

I must say at the outset that the four points you stated in your opening paragraph as to why you normally wouldn't try to respond to a piece like mine smack of postmodern despair. We should not say it's "fruitless to even try to dialogue" or that people can't understand things and it doesn't make any difference. In my view misunderstandings matter greatly because there are consequences to ideas. As has been true from the time of the Greeks till today, vigorous healthy debate is vital as all of us search for truth. Our differences – yours and mine – need to be discussed in the service of Truth.

Admittedly, in the religious tradition debate has often been divisive, and therefore I suppose you could say it was dangerous spiritually. On the other hand, I believe in the sovereignty of God, that He uses many of our debates and differences to produce powerfully important movements of His church with an attendant impact upon culture. I think of the Reformation as a case in point. That was certainly a divisive religious debate. It even led to religious wars and in some ways had a very negative impact upon the witness of the Christian church at the time. But look at what has come out of it. The Reformation has produced religious reformation. Until the Reformation nobody read the Bible. Now it is universally and widely read. On the Protestant side in the Reformation, I believe the essence of the gospel was preserved and maintained; and the priesthood of believers has given enormous energy and resurgence to the church. On the Catholic side, as I have discovered in my discussions with ECT, huge progress has been made in the stance of the Catholic Church with respect to church/state questions and in some very significant doctrinal areas. The Reformation has affected the Catholic Church almost as much as the Protestants. So even though we're divided, which is something all Christians should deplore, we have made huge progress religiously from where the church was before the Reformation.

On the cultural front, the effect of the Reformation has been nothing less than revolutionary. Do not forget that the Protestant work ethic, exported to this country, fueled the great Industrial Revolution. We should all be mindful of and grateful for the Reformation's impact on politics; the whole doctrine of sphere sovereignty had huge political ramifications, as did the book *Lex Rex* and its influence on the rule of law. Remember, too, Calvin was a great advocate of a republican form of government.

It is significant as well that because of the Reformation and the vitality of the evangelical movement born in post-Reformation England great spiritual awakenings were birthed in the 18th and 19th centuries. I would dare say that were it not for the Wesley-Wilberforce awakenings, along with the leadership of Edmund Burke, the Jacobins might have spilled across the English Channel and infested every land as they did France. This would have greatly weakened the church. Instead the precise opposite happened. Out of the Oxford movement in England came the spread of the gospel around the world, particularly in areas not reached before then.

So I do not agree that religious debate, discussions over opinions right and wrong, don't matter. They do. Profoundly so.

On the matter of Truth, which is going to be central to what perhaps you and I disagree on, I think it is the critical issue of the day. The Greeks examined the issue, of course, as has almost every philosopher of note. Immanuel Kant spent his life thinking about whether truth is knowable and how you can know it. The issue is clear: are the answers to life found by a thinker sitting in a Dutch oven and exclaiming after much reflection, *cogito ergo sum*, which in some ways led to the rise of a humanist view of the world, unintended though it was? Or is the meaning of life found in Revelation (which I believe is aided by reason)? This is a very fundamental question.

On the subject of Truth, let me say humbly that I consider myself a seeker. Pascal said once that there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who have given up to despair or don't think, and seekers. I want to stay in the latter. Postmodernists, by the way, are among the former, because, they say it doesn't matter. Believe me, Brian, it does.

Let me clarify also what I believe can be said about postmodernity and postmodernism which you seem to think people have difficulty understanding. In one way, of course, they do, because vacuums are never easily described. But the fact is that postmodernity is not something to argue about or engage in passionate debate for. Postmodernity simply means that we have emerged, for better or worse, from the modern era and we are in whatever comes after it (which I would submit is largely an intellectual vacuum which leads to nihilism.)

The postmodern era was either ushered in by or reflected by a variety of movements, most of which have their origin in Europe; deconstruction, relativism, subjectivism, and existentialism (not an exhaustive list.) The powerful existential movement in Europe, which then swept the campuses of America in the 60's, undermined the concept of reason and truth, which was of course central to the Enlightenment project. You could not have deconstructionism and at the same time any transcendent authority, or even guiding force of history. So postmodernity is simply a fact of history. It is an era which marks an end to the modern era. Someone, I've forgotten who at the moment, once said that modernity began with the French Revolution in 1789 and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Those are convenient delineation markers and pretty close to the truth, although modernity, I would argue, began to crumble under the assault of the existentialists and deconstructionists in the 60's.

The issue you and I might have, I think, is not over postmodernity; that's simply a chronological marking of eras; but rather over postmodernism. What happens when you add the "ism" to an era or any subject for that matter, is that you turn it into an ideology—a set of ideas and pre-suppositions that form a strong view about politics or behavior or life (ideology is the enemy of Revelation). It is not postmodernity I criticize—and particularly because there are some good things about it: in the Enlightenment reason stifled faith; it is postmodernism I object to, which is an attempt to make an ideological formulation out of those elements which contributed to the demise of the modern era.

I don't have time or space here to delineate for you why I think each of those movements were pernicious, although I think you've probably read enough about deconstructionism and existentialism to agree with me if you think it through. To put it in the most shorthand way, relativism and deconstruction and existentialism have to lead to the loss of any transcendent authority. Whenever a society lacks transcendent authority, it is going to be governed by whoever can obtain power – and there will be no restraints upon that person or party. The process is almost inevitable. Even democracies – and remember Franklin said democracy is a good thing if you can keep it – must have some overarching objective standards to support a rule of law; without that it will fall into chaos just like any other governing structure. If postmodernism succeeds in destroying transcendent authority, the inevitable consequences are anarchy and nihilism. But nihilism is a vacuum and all vacuums must be filled; so without the restraint of a higher law a tyrant can always be depended upon to step in to fill the power vacuum; and people always choose order over liberty.

Some postmodernists are quite honest about this. Look at the writings of Stanley Fish – Fish was for a while at least the leading deconstructionist in America. He quite frankly acknowledged that in the absence of truth, all intellectual discourse eventually degenerates into a power struggle. Remember his book, *There's No Such Thing as*

Free Speech and It's a Good Thing Too, and his stirring defense of the politically correct movement, which in my view stifles academic debate on the campuses. If you stop looking for truth and you stop debating primary questions, that is, the fundamental issues people deal with in life, then whoever occupies the seat of power makes those decisions for us. The utopians may think this is a good thing. They believe the victors (their choice) will be more enlightened and benign than the white oppressors who wrote history and of course were only expressing their view of life, which they imposed upon culture. The utopian myth, which for generations has been the principal enemy of liberty, is based on false premises as Christians who are aware of the Fall know.

I'm sorry if you think I have resorted in my arguments in Christianity Today to hyperbole or that I have dumbed down or simplified the case. It is anything but a simple case, but a 750 word limit imposes constraints; I could only hit the highlights. And my point was, in any event, that postmodernism is imploding because it has no rational basis to defend it. It's like Schaeffer used to say about modern man: his feet are planted firmly in midair.

You seem to think in your letter that I am attacking Christians who are postmodernists. I hope that's not so because as a Christian I don't think I should attack any other Christian. But as one who wants to employ the powers of reason and thinking, I think I have every right to debate and critique them as strenuously as I possibly can. It should all be in good spirit.

I think there may also be some confusion between us in distinguishing between those who are debating the post-modernists, which I do, and those Christians who are trying to reach the postmoderns. I'm sure you realize there's a huge difference here. I can engage in vigorous debate and should. But if you're trying to be sensitive to the postmodern mind, you should be loving and caring. You should be presenting our narrative as superior to any other, by letting them experience Jesus (but of course you cannot stop there. Once they know who Christ is you've got to lead them to the proposition that Christ is Truth and knowable. I'll come back to that in a few moments.)

I for one have a lot of sympathy for post moderns. They're drifting. They don't even know the questions they're supposed to be asking let alone the answers. They've been anesthetized by a culture which emphasizes pleasure and personal autonomy. A generation raised on channel-surfing has lost the capacity for linear thinking and analytical reasoning.

Let me confess at this point that I have had little experience in trying to win over post-moderns (by that I mean the people who live in this generation and have never known anything other than postmodern thought.) I've had experience, however, dealing with and battling postmodernists. I've also studied their writings, which I do not think, as you put in your letter, qualify for the phrase "density of postmodern philosophical writing." It isn't philosophical at all in the sense of the love of knowledge. It is, in my opinion, stridently ideological, which falls closer to the propaganda side of the fence than the side of reason. Okay, I'll admit, Christians do the same thing, often unthinkingly, and hurt our cause when they do.

One of the areas in which we differ is the change that post-modern people resent Christians because we are trying to impose some morality on them. They are misguided. Remember that Lincoln in the 1860 campaign was bitterly attacked for attempting to "impose morality." This is an old canard, probably in one way, going back to the Garden, God was imposing His morality. The serpent's temptation was that we could figure this out for ourselves and didn't need it imposed. I take this argument by postmodernists as spurious. (Whoever "wins" in a free political system "imposes" his will. Laws impose on people.)

There is no parallel reality, as you put it, with the rise of Stalin and Hitler. In fact the opposite case could be made. Surely you realize that some of the figures advancing leading postmodernist ideas have been Nazis. I think of course of Heidegger who was a member of the Nazi party (existentialism) and Paul de Man who was a Nazi sympathizer (deconstructionism), and Jacques Derrida who defended Nazi intellectuals. These men, among others, hated the West for its bourgeois capitalism, and saw an opportunity to challenge it first through the Nazi Socialist movement and when that failed, advanced their ideas on American campuses. These are men with an agenda, which includes gaining power for their ideas. Yes, to impose them.

Of course, the postmoderns are right in saying that looking over European history, those who have “a passionate commitment to a system of belief will be most willing not only to die for it but to kill for it.” But is it wrong to die for a noble cause—or to kill in a just war, restraining evil? The Greeks recognized courage as one of the four cardinal virtues – courage to defend justice. Where would we be if people did not have a wholehearted commitment to a system of belief like democracy, freedom, and liberty? We’d still be living under monarchs. The issue isn’t whether you’re willing to die for a particular system of belief – or in some way to kill for it. The problem is whether that system of belief is truth or a lie. In the case of fascism and communism, it was a utopian lie, predicated upon a number of ideas common to postmodernism. So I really think you’ve got that one backwards.

I know what you’re thinking and that is that Christians have used their passionate commitment to their belief system to not only die for it but to kill for it (wrongly, as in the Crusades). That’s true, because we’re fallen as well. But it is far less true than those who have abused their system of belief in non-Christian systems of thought (witness Islamists versus democratic liberals today). A dispassionate look at history bears this out. In the inquisitions, over several centuries, three thousand people were killed. (Moderns think it’s in the millions). That is absolutely horrible, indefensible; an abuse of Christian religious beliefs. But you see, it was an abuse of it, whereas often when people act in pursuit of a lie, that is, fascism or communism, they are acting consistent with their beliefs - a big difference. Remember, too, that in the Crusades, where thousands died and were slaughtered, the aim of the Crusaders was every bit as much political as religious. I am not a student of the Crusades, but I would dare say the political outweighed the religious.

On the other hand, Christianity has advanced the cause of humankind in ways that no other system in history has ever done—not Islam, certainly not communism, fascism, not Freudianism, not pragmatism, not socialism, not utilitarianism or any other “ism.” Just look at the glories of Western civilization—the great art treasures, music, learning, accomplishment, universal reading, education. It’s quite remarkable.

And as for being willing to not only die but kill for our belief system, if Lincoln, who was deeply motivated by his strong faith (informed admittedly by a confused theology) did not pursue the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of the slaves, we might still live under slavery today. Yes, hundreds of thousands died, but it was tragically necessary to end evil.

So my only point is that the view that people have of Christians as being oppressors who have done these horrible things through the ages is a result of propaganda and misinformation and a lack of an objective study of history. We ought to be correcting them, not pandering to them. If you really look at the history you cannot support their conclusion. More people died in the name of atheism in the 20th century than had died in all centuries prior to that in any cause. You as a Christian and I as a Christian have to put down this terrible distortion, often promoted by America’s strongly secular cultural elite.

You seem to worry, as the postmodernists do, that because some bad things have been done in the name of faith, our faith is no different than all the destructive ideologies. If there is no Truth, then that could be correct. But if some of these things are true and some false, and that distinction is made, then of course we take a very different perspective on the world.

I have great trouble with your argument near the end of the text before you get into the seven questions, which seems to frame the debate as between “my concern for the supposed denial of truth in the interest of self-indulgence” and the postmoderns belief that I am involved in “monopolization of truth in the interest of political dominance.” Apparently, you’re partly convinced that is true.

Dear brother, it is false. No one has a monopolization of truth. And the motive, of those of us who consider ourselves seekers of the truth, is surely not political dominance. It is cultural reformation. It is seeking justice, what the Hebrews called shalom, that is, peace and harmony in the community. For heaven’s sake, I of all people have worked for the poor, the marginalized, the suffering, the outcasts, the kids of inmates. Why? Because I’m a Christian, because I’ve seen up close what has happened to some of the most disadvantaged people in our society.

My sole desire is to pursue truth wherever it leads, never allowing it to be colored by partisan agenda or by cultural prejudice. I am a seeker, but being a seeker does not mean that one does not believe there is something to seek. If you read some of my writings, you will see that I believe there is Truth. I don't know how a Christian could believe otherwise because ultimate reality has to be in God the Creator. But I also believe that this truth can be known through a variety of ways, not just through scripture. I believe we can also make a very compelling argument to the postmodern generation, which is what I am desperately anxious to see us do. I want to see us lovingly approach them (that's technique or strategy), but then bring them to the point where they have to deal with the question of truth (substance). Schaeffer used to say that this was the issue of our age, and he was absolutely right, talking about "true truth" or "flaming truth." He talked about the concept of the law of non-contradiction, which postmodernists have seemed to suspend. I shouldn't say seemed to suspend, they have suspended it. They've dispensed with logic, reason and critical thinking.

I gather you also think that my colleagues and I in religious broadcasting would benefit from a "few off the air moments of thoughtful reflection on the word truth." Perhaps. But, I for one, have spent twenty years thinking about it very deeply, talking with the best scholars I know, reading the best works I could find, both secular and Christian.

By the way, I believe we are winning this debate over the question of truth or ultimate reality or discovering the way things really are. In a number of debates, Stanley Fish has been pushed into a corner, so much so that in the New York Times last year, he answered an inquiring reporter's question on this subject by saying: okay, there is truth, but it is impossible for human beings to know it. (That's a paraphrase because I don't have the article in front of me. It was a piece by Edward Rothstein, I believe, and you can find it, I'm sure, searching the Internet.) The postmodernist when pushed, finds it untenable to argue that there is no ultimate reality, no beginning, no origin, no source of authority. As I've noticed it, the postmodernist position is becoming more agnostic. We have a wonderful case that demonstrates that it can be known. I've lectured on this and would be happy to have you read or listen to my lectures. I've written about it in *Being the Body* and of course in *How Now Shall We Live?* This is where we must directly confront postmodernism, take advantage of all the opportunities it gives us – and I recognize there are some of course – to press the ultimate issue.

I have read your seven points in which you deal with the question of truth. I have no problem with point one in which you describe truth as reality, a description of what actually is. Where we get into some difficulty is when you start talking about a human perception of reality. People may think something is true, but of course truth is never determined by what people think. We might, as you put it, tell the truth as we know it and even swear to it. That happens all the time in a court room. What you're getting there is a human perception of circumstances or something that was witnessed or believed. It is a pursuit of what is true, that is a true account of things that help settle the issues in that trial. That is quite different than Truth or ultimate reality. Truth is truth and all of us are seeking it – however imperfectly we may perceive events. But our perceptions do not make it truth nor does our imperfection negate Truth.

Point three, if I understand it, which I'm not sure I do, I think I agree with, but it has nothing to do with the question of truth, other than you are correct that it ultimately rests in God.

Point four I think says that we're all seeking, and that sometimes in the process of seeking we make claims that are later proven to be untrue. Trust me, in my own intellectual pursuits, I've changed my opinion on things many times when I've learned more about them. But you have to be very careful in the way you're describing your position in point four that you don't fall into the great philosophical trap of believing that reality is only a matter of what we see, that it has no objective standing on its own, that truth is in the eyes of the beholder, or that the only thing we can possibly know about something is what we see in it. It's that line of reasoning that caused C.S. Lewis to write *The Abolition of Man* and particularly the wonderful essay "Men Without Chests." Two current day Christian philosophers have written on this powerfully. One is Alvin Plantinga, the other Nick Wolterstorff at Yale.

Your point five is whether moral truths change over the years. No they do not. It has always been true that murder is considered evil. We may gain a more advanced understanding of the truth as we seek to discover it and our moral consensus or moral understanding may change, we may become better informed about what is moral with respect to particular issues as the slavery example you use demonstrates. But that doesn't mean that the underlying truth about human dignity, for example, is changed. On this point, note that in the NIV, in 1 Timothy, Paul describes slave traders in the category with murderers and adulterers and perverts. He also set slaves free. Christians were in the vanguard of that movement. What we were doing was conforming society in a fallen world more closely to what are enduring, unchanging truths.

Certainly we cannot say that God's revelation changes over the years. The Bible is true yesterday, today and forever. It's God speaking and it of course is the ultimate source of moral truth.

You and I could agree that we humans imperfectly attempt to formulate our understandings of truth. Perhaps. But this is why I've become such a strong advocate of natural law, that is a recognition of what C.S. Lewis called the Tao in Mere Christianity, an understanding all people in all societies and all cultures at all times have shared. We look to the wisdom of the past for guidance, we see what others have discovered and we try to learn from it, that we may order human affairs accordingly. The problem in the postmodern era is that according to all the polls and my anecdotal experience, people believe there is no such thing as moral truth and it is unknowable. Previous generations back in the age of faith and in the age of reason have believed there was truth and that it was the highest goal in life to pursue it. We have abandoned that now, which is why the postmodern era is marked by such despair. Postmodernism has no answers. But that does not change the fact that there is moral truth; post moderns have simply given up trying to find it.

As to point six, I don't know if you've had an opportunity to read my book *How Now Shall We Live?* Or Jim Sire's book *The Universe Next Door*, but these are attempts to expound a Christian worldview, not based on a particular theological system, and certainly not governed by conservative Republican or liberal Democratic politics. *How Now Shall We Live?* is rooted in scripture and in some cases natural law. I will grant you that many people do not understand even what worldview means let alone what a Christian worldview is, but hopefully we've been doing a half decent job of educating them. As you probably know from reading my Christianity Today columns over the years I have gone to great lengths to expound this.

On point seven, you may be right that some people use the word truth and then are closed to further intellectual inquiry. This is tragic. Somebody who thinks he has all of the truth can be both insufferable and dangerous. I suppose people do that, but just because some people abuse a concept, doesn't mean that the concept is flawed.

Now we come to the question that really matters. How do we approach postmodernism and the postmodern vacuum? My most fervent prayer is that Christians will lovingly and gently give a reason for the hope which is within us and that we will rescue reason. In throwing out modernity, the postmodern era has gone to an excess. The pendulum always swings too far to one side or the other. It has abandoned reason. (Admittedly reason was once the enemy of the faith, but I don't think it need be.) My ultimate authority is in the scripture, but analytical, critical thinking (reason) enables me to decide how scripture applies to life. It enables me to be discerning about false values. If I only knew what was in the scripture, I couldn't possibly understand what's wrong with many other propositions being advanced in general discourse. I believe Christianity is the ally of reason.

If we're able to make a good, well reasoned case, and if people like you who are working with the postmoderns can show them love and a sensitivity to their need for a narrative and understanding but eventually lead them to the issue of truth, then there is a very good prospect that something good will come out of what I believe to be the emerging crack-up of postmodernity. It will not be a return to the age of faith, which to me seems impossible in a culture that has gone so far from its religious roots. Nor will it be a resurrection of the modern era, resting on reason and science. I think it could very well be a combination of both: a faith that is reasonable. I think 9-11 has moved us dramatically in this direction.

I saw something the other day that brings this hope to me. Louise Slaughter, a congresswoman from New York, was talking about how important it was that President Bush's request for increased funding for the National Endowment of the Arts be enacted. (That's one Bush initiative I'm not happy with, believing as I do that funding should be private and municipal perhaps, but not federal.) What Slaughter said is, "There's nothing in the world that helps economic development more than arts programs...it was foolish for Congress to choke them and starve them. We should cherish the people who can tell us who we are, where we came from, and where we hope to go." What this tells me is that people are still asking the same questions the Greeks asked. They're still looking for ultimate meaning, still looking for first principles. They're still plagued by the questions that exist within us because the Imago Dei is within us. The problem is that you are not going to find that answer in the art world. I think we really have a much better answer if we have the opportunity to explain this to her. And that, dear brother, is what my column was all about.

I do have concern that we are promoting in our churches "an image and emotion-driven message" when of course what we ought to be advancing revealed propositional truth. This generation has been largely raised on images. That's one reason why postmodern people find the narrative so attractive. Now I recognize that we may use techniques, even some I don't like, to get the attention of the postmodern. But we can't assume their basic presuppositions. We've got to be guided by ours and lovingly and gently lead them to understand ours. Admittedly, this is very difficult because they have been deeply culturally ingrained and their natural capacities for reason and analysis impaired. But I refuse to submit to despair. I want us to press on. I want the church, for all her flaws, to clean herself up and be the bride of Christ, and I want us vigorously and lovingly defending truth.

This is a longer reply than I intended. I will ask apologies in advance for a bit of sloppiness, but this is largely stream of consciousness dictation. While I could spend the time to tighten up these arguments, I don't have it. So imperfect though the presentation may be, the convictions are sincerely and deeply held. God bless you, brother.