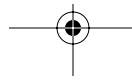


Introduction

LINING UP THE DUCKS: CHRISTIANITY AND POSTMODERNISM



With tears streaking their dirty faces, two little girls raced from window to window, madly closing curtains, and then took refuge under the dining-room table, carefully pulling the chairs in close around them. Sobs shaking their small frames, the sisters clung to each other as they crouched in their makeshift fortress. No imaginary monster or neighborhood bully generated their fear. This time a bomb threatened their very lives, as the older sister well knew. In her first-grade class, she had been trained to recognize and react immediately to multiple air-raid warnings. One kind of siren indicated that the class must line up at the door and then file out to the playground. Another, the most fun to practice, directed students to quickly walk home. The third sent everyone scurrying to the classroom's windowless wall, pressing fearful faces against cinderblock. The last, and scariest of all, was the "Duck and Cover" siren, and every child knew what it meant: "Get under your desks with arms over your heads! The communists are dropping an atom bomb!" No child thought to ask why the communists would think to send an atom bomb toward their sleepy suburb of San Francisco. All they knew is what adults taught them: communists wanted to destroy their country.





It was a Duck-and-Cover siren that shattered the sisters' complacent world that sunny summer day. The first-grader thought of conversations she had heard while eating dinner at the table above her. Her father, an engineer (but not the kind that drives trains, she often had to explain), sometimes discussed his special training in air-raid shelter design, and he would speculate where best to dig one on his own property. So this little girl was very much aware of the communist threat.

She was I: a child born into and nurtured by the Cold War, too young to have heard of Joe McCarthy but old enough to know "Better dead than red." Under the dining-room table, however, I was not yet ready to die.

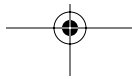
The Postmodern Threat

I recount my childhood trauma in order to set up an analogy for how many individuals have responded to "postmodernism": as a threat to what Americans, especially people of faith, hold dear. Communism was to many in the middle of the twentieth century what postmodernism was, and still is, to many after its turn: an ideology that dismisses God and undermines cultural values; a worldview that calls truth as we know it into question; a force that subverts the fundamental assumptions on which the United States was established, destabilizing institutions that made it great.

The analogy, of course, is not exact. Communism was a political ideology, while postmodernism questions any political commitment, analyzing how and why people fiercely stand for and by the truth claims of their political, as well as all other, ideals. From the perspective of those who initiated it, postmodernism is not an "ideology" or "worldview" at all. *Exposé* might be a better word for it: postmodernism exposes the shaky foundations on which ideologies and worldviews rest. (Not coincidentally, Marxist intellectuals were among the first to attack postmodernism, for it questioned their ideology.)¹

Despite this and other differences, the analogy between communism and postmodernism may be helpful for several reasons. First, my duck-and-cover under the dining-room table was based on legitimate fears. Communists did indeed see themselves as adversaries of U.S. capitalism, maintain-

¹I disagree with Myron Penner when he calls postmodernism a "worldview." I think he is more accurate when he refers to it as an "ethos," an "intellectual attitude or frame of mind that shapes the style and substance of thought and provides one with a starting point for reflection." See his introduction to *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 17.



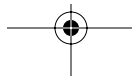


ing that military force was a necessary means to establish their power. Joseph Stalin, though long dead by the time of my dining-room drama, believed that it was expedient for millions to die so that one ideology might live—an ironic reversal of Caiaphas’s statement about Christ, that it was “expedient” for one man to die so that many people might live (John 18:14). To complete the analogy, then, just as communism is inherently antagonistic toward free-market economics, postmodernism is inherently antagonistic toward evangelism, seeming to undermine the call to world mission.

Second, the real shortsightedness of 1960s duck-and-cover drills lay in the assumption that hiding under a desk or table would provide protection from an atomic blast. So also a duck-and-cover attitude toward postmodernism provides no protection. It must be studied and understood. Perhaps if more people in the 1950s and 1960s had probed and prodded, rather than feared, Soviet communism, they might have discovered something that became clear during the 1990s: the Russians did not have the economic resources to overthrow the United States and elevate communism to the reigning ideology. Similarly, if Christians probed and prodded postmodernism, they would discover that it does not have the power to destroy the truths that they cherish.

Ironically, both communism and postmodernism were generated by impulses consonant with Christianity. *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was partially based on Friedrich Engels’s 1844 sojourn in Manchester, England, where laissez-faire economics had led to deplorable conditions for the working class. With no government controls over factory conditions, workers had no recourse when machinery put out their eyes or severed their fingers. Their wounds would fester in the only dwellings they could afford: overcrowded tenements where Engels saw them forced to “wade through puddles of stale urine and excrement.”² It is no wonder that he and Karl Marx chose a model for government harmonious with Christ’s directive to the rich young man—“sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor” (Matthew 19:21)—as well as with Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-35, which recount how resources were shared commonly in the early church. Of course, the coerced collectivism of Soviet communism was no solution, and today only the most die-hard ideologue thinks that communism can work on a na-

²Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Victorian Age*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 2B:1707.





tional level. But its original impulse—to remedy the flaws in capitalism—should be valued by Christians. So also the early impulse of postmodernism—to remedy the flaws in modernism—should be valued by Christians.

Unfortunately, remedies often create their own excesses as one extreme elicits an equal and opposite reaction. Marxism became an excuse, if not impetus, for purges and genocide. And even though postmodernists will never exile people to gulags or invade Eastern Europe with tanks, many Christians worry that the invasion of North America by postmodern theory has sent Christianity into exile, that postmodernism is slowly conquering society with its weapons of mass destruction: atheism, nihilism, relativism, skepticism and immorality.

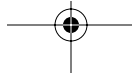
That's why I'm writing this book: to explore when such worries are warranted and when they are not.

Judging Postmodernism

The first thing I want to emphasize is that perspectives on life should not be judged by the people who misuse them. After all, thousands have been killed in the name of Christ. When I told a non-Christian English professor that I believe in the resurrected Christ, she snapped back, "What about the Crusades? What about the Inquisition?" I could only respond that an earnest seeker after the truths of existence does not reject an answer because of the fanatical excesses of its followers.

In this book I want to say the same thing about postmodernism: it should not be judged by problematic practices carried out in its name. This is not to suggest that Christianity and postmodernism are comparable answers to the meaning of life. The first is based on a certain person—the incarnation of God on earth—while the second is based upon a certain attitude: a suspicion of ready answers, an emphasis on the limitations of language, an awareness of the artifices of tradition. This book will bring the postmodern attitude to bear on following Christ, using my own experience for the argument's core. In the language of evangelical Christianity, my personal testimony will serve as a witness to my understanding of a life in Christ. In the language of postmodernism, I will acknowledge the *positionality* of my beliefs.

After hearing me speak at secular conferences, some non-Christian scholars have described me as a "postmodern Christian." Because earnest defenders as well as energetic critics of Christianity would equally consider the





phrase “postmodern Christian” an oxymoron (like “jumbo shrimp”), I am willing, if hesitant, to accept the label, enjoying a position between opposing camps. This does not mean I am lukewarm about my faith. It is the heat of my commitment to Christ that has warmed me to postmodernism. This book will argue, in fact, that postmodernism serves faith. It certainly has served mine.

Escaping from the Duck-and-Cover

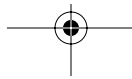
What about the little girls whimpering under the dining-room table? What saved them from their tearful turmoil? Their halo-encircled mother, back-lit from the midday sun, entered from a door to the outside. I still remember peeking out from under the table as I heard the click of the latch and the squeak of the door hinges. A confused look wrinkled Mother’s brow as her eyes, adjusting to the darkened room, beheld two chairs moving mysteriously away from the table, followed by two sobbing girls who clutched at her for comfort.

Though the halo vanished when she shut the door, Mother did indeed bring comfort, explaining that the siren was simply a scheduled test of the city’s civil defense system; there was no imminent peril. Similarly, I would like to suggest that sirens about postmodernism might best be seen as helpful tests of our faith defense systems rather than signs of imminent demise. In fact, I want to change the siren image altogether by considering the origin of the word *siren*—a strategy that, in my experience, both postmodernists and pastors love to employ.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the word *siren* first appears in Homer’s famous epic *The Odyssey*, referring to sea nymphs whose beautiful singing lured sailors toward dangerous rocks, where their ships crashed and foundered.³ Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s tale, desires to hear the sirens’ song as he sails home from the Trojan War. He therefore has his men tie him to the crosslike mast of his ship where he can listen while they, with plugged ears, safely sail around the rocks. And though the seductive music nearly overpowers him, Odysseus makes it through without submitting to its tempting lure.

I assume that anyone picking up a book with a title like *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith* wants neither to crash their ship of faith nor to im-

³The *Oxford English Dictionary*, considered the definitive scholarly source for word origins, is employed throughout this book, cited as *OED*.





itate sailors who, with ears plugged to isolate them from their surroundings, merely followed the dictates of a human (and hence flawed) authority. This book is meant to encourage Christians in their own odyssey: ones who can revel in the siren song of postmodernism exactly because they are tied to the mastlike cross of faith.

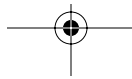
Defining Postmodernism

By now you are probably asking, “What exactly *is* postmodernism?” This is like asking, “What exactly *is* Christianity?” On one level the answers are easy, indicated by the names themselves: *Christianity* follows the teachings of Christ; *postmodernism* follows the teachings of modernism. The word *follows*, of course, has different—almost opposite—meanings in my two definitions: the Christian accedes to (follows) the words of Christ in order to affirm their truth, while the postmodernist supersedes (follows) the words of modernists in order to question their truth.

What I have done here, as I will do throughout this book, is to illustrate one component of postmodernism, knowing that illustration is often the best way to clarify complex ideas. In this case, I have shown that even a simple word like *follows* is not one-dimensional; it changes meaning depending on its context. Ironically, Marxist theorists, believing postmodernism to be merely an extension and intensification of modernist consumerism, would prefer the first meaning of *follows*. To them postmodernism accedes to “the logic of late capitalism,” as Fredric Jameson famously put it.⁴ As we can see, the word *follows* is influenced not only by its context but also by assumptions the reader brings to it. Language is slippery.

Even the statement “Christianity follows the teachings of Christ” is a bit slippery. Many people use it merely to endorse an ethical system based on Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. Others regard following Jesus to be an issue of belief more than practice, pointing out that Christ’s most important teaching is “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Indeed, if we were to ask Christians around America to state the top ten essentials for following Christ, we would get different lists depending on whether the respondents were Lutheran, Pentecostal, Mennonite or Eastern Orthodox. In fact, the essentials for Christian practice would differ even

⁴Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-93.





within each of these denominations depending on the location and ethnicity of individual congregations. And I won't even mention the difference between U.S. Episcopalians or Catholics and those in Africa or Ireland (but, of course, I just did: another way that language doesn't always do what it claims).

Definitions of postmodernism differ as dramatically. Some theorists proclaim that it is passé, while others continue to publish books and articles reveling in its relevance.⁵ One specialist, Eleanor Heartney, comments in 2001 that "even the most ardent advocates of postmodernism have been forced to admit that the term has become discredited by its very popularity." However, she goes on to assert that "postmodernism has remade the world in ways that can never be retracted."⁶ In other words, whether or not one regards our times as "postpostmodern," as some do, postmodernism has been a culture-changing movement that must be taken seriously and studied.

Dismissing Postmodernism

In my experience, scholars who dismiss postmodernism by denying its lasting relevance are often those who never liked it in the first place: people who were molded by modernist assumptions—like Marxist critics, scientists religiously devoted to evolutionary theory, emphatic adherents to secular humanism.⁷ Ironically, their forebears said the same thing about Christianity in the 1920s and 1930s: that it was passé, defunct—at least for the well educated. Postmodernism and Christianity make odd bedfellows, both having been disdained by the same kind of people.

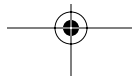
This is why I want to address, and possibly redress, the duck-and-cover repudiation of postmodernism by Christians. For example, Gene Edward Veith Jr., in his book *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, seems to regard everything he doesn't like about the 1990s as "postmodern": the animal rights movement, "collaborative learning," television remote controls, just to name a few.⁸ On one level he is right: con-

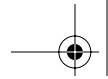
⁵Brian McHale argued in 2004 that the term *postmodernism* is still useful. See *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

⁶Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 77.

⁷I will make the case in chapter four that Christians who revile postmodernism are often thinking like modernists.

⁸Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), pp. 74, 183, 81. This book was employed as a textbook for Focus on the Family college courses as late as 2004.





temporary culture is indeed “postmodern.” We have been in the midst of “postmodernity” for at least a quarter of a century now—the same way nineteenth-century English citizens had been in the midst of “Victorian” culture even before Victoria came to the throne in 1837. (Traditionally, the Victorian era starts with the passage of the First Reform Bill in 1832.) With the benefit of hindsight, historians and sociologists identify cultural trends as beginning before the people living in that culture are ever aware of them. Veith, however, does not always honor the intelligent distinction he makes between postmodernity, the era, and postmodernism the attitude.⁹ Though Queen Victoria’s attitudes affected the era during which she reigned (1837-1901)—some for good, some for ill—she didn’t *cause* the “Victorian” conditions that Engels witnessed in 1844 Manchester. Similarly, the attitude we call “postmodernism” didn’t cause all the ills (which are legion) of postmodernity. Besides, I know earnest Christians who endorse animal rights (C. S. Lewis actually argued that our pets would be in heaven), collaborative learning (a model very close to my Sunday school experience) and even remote controls.

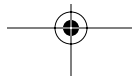
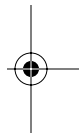
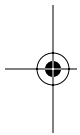
Those willing to enter the theater of postmodernism obviously see it in a radically different light from those who stand outside protesting that its performances are evil. This point, itself, is an assumption of postmodernism: that the way we see reality depends on our perspective and that our perspective is molded by our *situatedness*.

Postmodern Situatedness

I did not fully understand “situatedness” until I moved to Pennsylvania after having grown up and earned my Ph.D. in California. My first May in Pennsylvania, I was home alone one night when a window-rattling thunderclap extinguished the lights. Trying to remember where I had stored the candles, I suddenly noticed a camera flash coming from the deck outside the living-room window—then another. My hands protectively crossed my chest as I ran behind the kitchen wall, assuming that some peeping Tom was taking photographs. Slowly peeking around the wall, I witnessed multiple flashes, as though a whole crew of paparazzi were in my yard. But as I stared, I noticed that some of the flashbulbs were coming from the tops of trees, a good thirty feet above the ground.

Only then did I feel appropriately stupid: these were no peeping pa-

⁹Ibid., pp. 19, 24.





parazzi with invasive cameras. I was seeing fireflies. My confusion turned to delight as I ran out onto the deck to watch more closely. Even then, however, I perceived with California eyes. For as I watched the bugs flashing against the distant trees, it looked exactly to me like a television commercial for Mr. Clean, as though the trees were sparkling from a fresh washing up. What really were being washed up were my watching eyes; by moving cross-country, I was finally experiencing what postmodernists had told me: the perceptions one takes for granted often turn out to be flies in the night.

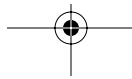
Let me give an example related to faith. During the U.S. Civil War, earnest Christians from both the North and the South believed that God was on their side, and both appealed to the truth of Scripture in their rhetoric. Christian slave owners quoted Ephesians 6:5, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,” to legitimize their practice. And they justified their fugitive slave laws by citing Genesis 16, where an angel tells a runaway slave, Hagar, to return to her masters, Abram and Sarai. Many regarded the subordination of blacks to whites as a fundamental principle of God’s creation, established in Genesis 1:4: “God separated the light from the darkness.”¹⁰

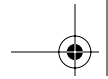
In contrast, some Christians in the North led the abolitionist movement and participated in the Underground Railroad, illegally smuggling runaway slaves all the way to Canada. They broke the law believing that the truth of verses they read in their King James Bibles—“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21) or “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves” (Hebrews 13:17)—was superseded by the truth of Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Both sets of Christians equally believed the Bible to be universally true, but each interpreted it from their own context.¹¹ Postmodernism, in recognition of realities like this, encourages attempts to understand the conflicting “truths” of each group and to acknowledge their “situatedness.” This is not the same as accepting all “truths” as equally valid, which is how many peo-

¹⁰For a rigorous discussion of how Southern slaveholders used the Bible to justify their practices, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). The interpretation of Genesis 1:4 was recounted to me by a pastor in South Carolina, who heard it used to justify segregation as late as the 1980s.

¹¹Rex Koivisto, an evangelical theologian at Multnomah Bible College, rightly notes that all Christians “interpret out of a cultural, historical context, through an ecclesiastical context, looking for the Bible’s relevance to cultural problems.” See *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint/Victor, 1993), p. 136.





ple interpret postmodernism, leading them to accuse it of nihilistic relativism. This accusation, though completely understandable, unfortunately generates a duck-and-cover attitude toward postmodernism.

From Duck-and-Cover to Duck-and-Rabbit

Instead of the “duck and cover!” response, which dismisses postmodernism with accusations of radical relativism, it is more helpful to see postmodernism as presenting the famous “duck or rabbit?” conundrum—see figure 1.1.

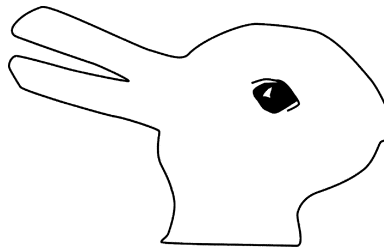


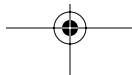
Figure 1.1. Duck or rabbit?

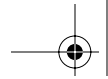
Since the 1930s, scholars have been analyzing why some people when they look at this figure first see a duck, and why others see a rabbit. Today they might analyze why some people, when they look at affirmative action, see reverse discrimination, while others see a necessary counterbalance to racist practices. The postmodernist, however, would concentrate on the ability to change one’s initial perception through an intentional switch in focus: seeing the duck’s beak as a rabbit’s long ears. This does not mean that the form can be whatever one wants it to be—an accusation often leveled at postmodernism. The shape of the image delimits how one can interpret it.

Christian Ducks (or Rabbits)

While critics have accused postmodernists of dismissing historical facts by reducing them to the artificial constructions of culture or the manipulations of the power elite, this is the case for only the most radical. As Linda Hutcheon notes, for most postmodernists “past events existed empirically, but in epistemological terms we can only know them today through texts. Past events are given meaning, not existence, by their representation in history.”¹²

¹²Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 82.





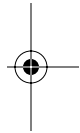
Christians should be familiar with this approach. Faced with the exact same facts in Scripture, some readers see ducks, others see rabbits. For example, I grew up in an evangelical church that was extremely suspicious about the practice of *glossolalia*, the Greek term for “speaking in tongues.” I was taught that this style of worship ceased to be appropriate after the first century of the church’s existence, primarily because the loss of control represented by glossolalia could be manipulated by Satan. Pentecostal Christians, however, regard the *fact* of Pentecost, when the apostles “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4), as still applicable to current followers of Christ. After all, they point out, Paul gives explicit instructions about employing the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12:7-11) only fourteen verses after he gives guidelines for the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), one of the prescriptions most universally followed by Christians.

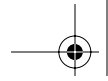
Yet in the very same chapter in which he exhorts us about the Lord’s Supper, Paul also speaks about the veiling of women, giving prescriptions that most Christians today ignore. Thus, when conservative Anabaptists—certain Amish and Mennonite believers—still take seriously the prayer veil, women wearing head coverings over hair that they do not cut (1 Corinthians 11:15), we need to take note: why do they interpret as relevant biblical practices that others believe no longer applicable? It’s like the duck/rabbit conundrum: people who see a duck perceive it as facing to the left, while those recognizing a rabbit see it facing right. So also Christians dismissing the veiling of women perceive the passage about it in 1 Corinthians 11 as looking back to outmoded cultural contexts, usually symbolized to the left on a timeline; those honoring the head covering look to the right on the timeline, seeing its relevance now and into the future.

Significantly, once one sees both duck and rabbit, she can flip back and forth in perspective, recognizing both as present in the drawing. I hope to do the same in this book, flipping back and forth between the strengths and weaknesses of postmodern discourse, as well as of Christian rhetoric. In this introduction I have primarily focused on postmodernism as facing a positive direction, largely because many Christians regard it with a duck-and-cover attitude. But I am very aware of its problems, and in the final chapters of the book I will mount my most rigorous critiques.

An Overview of the Book

Because postmodernism is more sophisticated than many people realize, I





start by setting up a simple scaffolding on which to build toward more and more complex ideas. I therefore advise that you read the chapters in the order I give them. The analysis found in later chapters will make much more sense in light of earlier discussions.

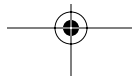
In chapter one I tell my own story, explaining how a fascination with language contributed not only to my Christian journey but also to my interest in postmodernism. As I outline my own history, I demonstrate why we should take seriously postmodern views of history.

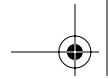
Because postmodernism developed in response to modernism, chapter two presents key thinkers who contributed to the construction of modernism in philosophy, science and the arts. At the end of the chapter, I highlight several postmodern thinkers who challenged modernist assumptions in philosophy and science.

I devote chapter three entirely to the arts, since technically this is where postmodernism began. Though numerous other Christians have written helpful works on postmodernism, they have tended to focus on the differences between modernism and postmodernism in philosophy and theology. In contrast, my book gives more attention to the modernist mystification of art in order to explain how postmodernism has undermined assumptions of secular humanism.

Chapter four addresses a key concern of Christians: postmodern antifoundationalism. In this chapter I adopt ideas from postmodern neopragmatists and Christians in the Radical Orthodoxy movement (as well as from my Sunday school experience) in order to challenge readers in their assessment of foundations. Ultimately, I suggest that Christian foundationalism reflects modernist values more than it does Christian orthodoxy.

The next two chapters grapple with poststructuralism, a fundamental ingredient of contemporary theory often overlooked by theological engagements with postmodernism. After explaining “structuralism” and the “post-structuralist” response, chapter five outlines one aspect of poststructuralism, the “deconstruction” made famous by Jacques Derrida, and suggests ways that it resonates with biblical teaching. Chapter six discusses how postmodern theorists developed Ludwig von Wittgenstein’s idea of “language games,” explaining how these games contributed to what is commonly called “the cultural construction of knowledge.” To make my analysis more accessible, I use my childhood fascination with construction paper as a metaphor, relating the construction of knowledge to ways that we see Christ.





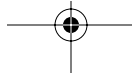
Chapter seven discusses the complex philosophical issue of relativism. After providing a historical overview of relativism, I illustrate several different kinds that are manifest in postmodern thought. I argue that some forms of relativism are more philosophically viable than others and suggest how Christians might respond to the intellectually irresponsible yet often-heard phrase “Everything is relative.”

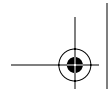
In chapter eight I continue my critique by suggesting that many of those Christians who denounce postmodernism often demonstrate its most pervasive attribute: what critics call the “commodification of identity.” I encourage Christians to demonstrate instead the biblical injunctions to be in the world but not of it, to be wise as serpents but gentle as doves, and I show how postmodernism might help in the process. After discussing pluralism within the Bible itself, I close the book with the issue of evangelism, suggesting how Christians might use postmodern paradigms to help share the truth of Christ.

Navigating This Book

Throughout the book I have tried to make the complicated discourse of postmodernism as understandable as possible. Accessibility, however, inevitably simplifies, eliminating the nuances of complex issues and arguments. It reminds me of the first time I went skiing. A friend took me up the slope (after I had fallen off the T-bar at least eleven times) and then instructed me to keep my skis straight as I went off the hill and to “go pigeon-toed” if I wanted to slow down. Next she dug in her poles and pushed off the mountain, leaving me to fend for myself. I soon discovered that her explanation was simpler in the hearing than the doing. Racing faster and faster down the snowy slope in terror, I was unable to get my skis into a pigeon-toed position. Hence, as the ski lodge loomed closer and closer, threatening to halt my progress all too dramatically, I stopped the only way I knew how: by ducking into a snowbank, covering my ineptitude with icy crystals. As I hurled my body into the wall of snow, I realized that I had entirely missed the nuances of skiing.

Having learned from my skiing “duck and cover,” I want to take my readers down the slippery slope of postmodernism with care. I have an advantage over some of the ski-instructor Christians who have written books attacking postmodernism. While Christian critics too often play telephone, relying on summaries from other people attacking postmodernism, I have



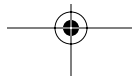


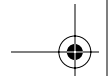
read many (certainly not all) of the famous theorists whose writings helped shape postmodern discourse: Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Michael Polanyi, Mikhail Bakhtin, Thomas Kuhn, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Linda Hutcheon, Jonathan Culler, Jane Gallup, Judith Butler and so on. Were I to outline the thought of each, I'm sure many of my readers would soon be hurling themselves into intellectual snowbanks. Instead, having grappled firsthand with the writings of these theorists, I hope to present their accumulated wisdom (or perversity—duck or rabbit?) as simply as possible.

Rather than expecting readers to go down the hill by themselves, I employ analogies from my own experience as well as examples from contemporary culture to tangibly illustrate not only the theory but also its application to Christianity. Periodically I will refer to more scholarly works, just in case readers want to dig their ski poles into more difficult runs. However, I tend to avoid the moguls of postmodern theology, not only because they are beyond my expertise but also because other Christians have negotiated them so well.¹³ Instead, I focus my attention on the postmodern view of language, discussing its influence not only on philosophy and art but also on contemporary social



¹³Most accessible of all is Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). Also accessible is J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), which brings postmodern views of the self into conversation with biblical views of identity. For the historical development of postmodern ideas in philosophy, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). For more scholarly engagement between postmodernism and Christian theology, I recommend Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); and Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003). There are also several essays I have found especially helpful: Philip D. Kenneson, "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Mark R. Schwehn, "Christianity and Postmodernism: Uneasy Allies," in *Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire*, ed. David A. Hoekema and Bobby Fong (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and James K. A. Smith, "A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion and Postmodernism Revisited," in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005). For the best overview of differences between modernist and postmodern theologies, see Nancey Murphy and James William McClendon Jr., "Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," *Modern Theology* 5, no. 3 (April 1989): 191-214.





Introduction

values. I sometimes play with language, as do many postmodernists, creating puns and inserting parentheses into words or phrases to expose how language can, with barely noticeable traces, quickly change meaning. In another postmodern move, I often juxtapose homey illustrations to serious theoretical issues. This may bother readers who feel jarred by sudden transitions from powdery whimsy to crusty scholarship. But those who make it to the end of this book without abandoning their skis should be able to explain why my style reflects the influence of postmodernism.

I do not claim to be an expert instructor. Because postmodernism is as multifarious as the culture in which it is embedded, I cannot discuss its every aspect. Furthermore, what is a “duck” to me will be a “rabbit” to someone else. Instead, think of me as someone who has learned that to duck and cover is not the best response to the sirens of our culture.

