

Postmodernism and truth: a theological perspective

When Ed came back from Bali/Australia/New Zealand he brought with him an article by Bruce Hamill, a Presbyterian minister in Darfield, NZ, called "Postmodernism and truth: a theological perspective" from the journal "Stimulus" (vol.5, no. 1, Feb 1997). It's a interesting article, but a bit long for THTH, so I'm taking the liberty of offering you some of the "nuggets" from it. I think a basic understanding of postmodernism and how the ideas it propounds effect us today will help any Christian speak more confidently about their faith.

Peace,

Robin

P.S. Here's a quick comment from Ed before I get to Hamill. "Even if Bruce here is a bit more Barthian than we THTH editors are (see his final two sentences below), he's a long-time THTH receiver and has the floor for today. Marie and I had a great kaffee-klatsch at the Hamill home last October. It transpired with an art-print of 'Barth's church,' the cathedral in Basel, on the wall before us. Might that be ominous? Did I cave in? Not really. Here's why: although 'kaffee-klatsch' does not appear in any of the standard lists of the means of grace, Luther comes close to saying so. His Smalcald Articles go so far as to call such a conversational venue one of God's channels for the Gospel. That pertains, of course, if/when the klatschers themselves are in the Christian Koinonia. That Bruce resides inside that Koinonia the paragraphs below amply demonstrate."

Hamill begins by defining postmodernism – an important word in many academic circles these days. One of the basic ideas of

postmodernism is that most everything we know, we know through language. Since we don't all understand language in exactly the same way, our grasp of the knowledge of reality is fluid – it shifts with the social context in which we find ourselves. What comes to my mind when someone says “cat” probably isn't exactly what comes to your mind and so this imprecision of language leaves us with gaps in our communication as well as our respective perceptions of reality.

What postmodernists say is the result of this contingent sense of reality is that there is only “your truth” or “my truth”, no TRUTH. What a community accepts as true is only what is agreed upon by the majority of folks (or folks with power) – it doesn't have anything to do with truth that is true for anybody, anywhere, anytime.

Hamill asserts that this view of life isn't really about accepting that we might all learn pieces of truth from each other that we can't see from our own perspective, but rather it's about rejecting the idea of truth altogether. Much of postmodernist work has been deconstruction – tearing down structures of knowledge that have been built in the last four hundred years or so to explain reality.

Hamill offers a Christian alternative between the absolutism of modernist empirical knowledge and the absolutism of postmodernist anti-knowledge. He uses the linguistic ideas of two philosophers – Wittgenstein and Polanyi – combined with the personalist tradition of classical trinitarian theology to make his points. (don't get nervous, I'll explain this stuff).

Wittgenstein says that language isn't merely a clear cut one-for-one relationship between an object and the symbol which represents it (the furry four-legged creature who sleeps on your bed and the word cat, for example), but also includes the way in

which we use the word in community. We have rules about the way words are used that make a word's function more complex than just the naming of an object.

Polanyi takes this idea a step further and says that this word-oriented, rule-governed perception of the world also can't be separated from non-linguistic knowing – petting the four legged creature, hearing it purr, cleaning up the hair balls. Taken together, Wittgenstein and Polanyi offer a dynamic view of language. Language is what we use to understand the world.

This view differs from the static view of the traditionalists (modernist empirical knowledge) who conceive of language as impersonal and the meaning of terms as fixed. In other words, language means something in and of itself without any interaction with the speaker or hearer.

Hamill says that by focusing on the language itself, whether its absolute fixed capacity to name truth or its absolute inability to name truth, is to misuse language. He says, especially using Wittgenstein and Polanyi's insights, that language itself cannot be the focus of attention. "We use language to see with, rather than to look at and to compare it with the world." Language is the lens we look through to see other things, so if we are focusing on the lens itself, we won't be able to see anything else.

He goes on. "We might say that the term 'true' applies to language when that language (properly used) allows truth to happen." Truth is what happens when people "involved with the language and practices of the community" interact with one another. Hamill says that "the correct response to the postmodern relativizing question 'Whose truth?' when it is asked of someone who makes a sincere truth claim is; 'My truth – and what do you think?'" It's in the interaction between language

users where the possibility for truth lies.

Hamill closes his article by drawing his argument specifically to Jesus Christ. He says that "Jesus' self-identification with 'the truth' about God (according to John's Gospel) is consonant with the relational and personal account of linguistic truth as an event of disclosure." We learn about the triune God by knowing Jesus. "Jesus permits us to dwell in him and find access to the Father." We can't keep the concept of truth locked in analytical propositions or throw out altogether language's ability to facilitate truth. "Theological truth relies wholly on the self-authenticating truth of God in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the place where humanity and God meet. It relies on the one who is himself God's concrete claim on humanity and therefore on language (correctly understood) and truth."