

All this Postmodernism Stuff: What's it Mean, What's it Matter?

by Chad Hall

Unless you've been living in a hole the last few years, you've come across the term "postmodern." In my office, the concept has become the butt of jokes, the target of scorn, and the cause for an increase in TUMS consumption.

Truth is, nobody knows what postmodernity "is" because it is a set of emerging and often contradictory cultural elements. It's two parts philosophy, one part pragmatism, and seven parts mystery meat. The name even tips us off to the truth that we know something is happening that we cannot yet define. If you think about it, it's pretty postmodern to have something that can't even be labeled, but it's also a big challenge as churches try to figure how to minister to postmodern people (aka "pomos").

There is no easy way through this little situation in which we find ourselves. Sooner or later, the planet will be overrun with pomos and we'll have plenty of pomo-friendly churches (who will someday struggle to be relevant to popomos). But for now, most churches are pomophobic. For the good people of Red Brick Baptist Church, a rising tide of de-constructing truth-questioners who have sincere reservations about the relevancy of RBBC's mere existence can be quite scary. Change usually comes to the party with his ugly sister Fear, and fear is one of the major factors causing the church to stumble and bumble as it tries to deal with the pomos.

It would be nice if we could take the Modern approach to postmodernity. Then we could define it, dissect it, label it, and put it in a box on the shelf and control it. We sure wouldn't have to fear it if we could be in control. Only really big sissies are scared of the formaldehyde-soaked frog in the biology cabinet, so it'd be great if we could somehow put postmodernity up there with that frog. Well, give up on understanding postmodernity to such an extent that you can have control over it. That won't happen. But you might learn enough about postmodernity so that you can lay off the TUMS a little. For those who don't have a clue, here are some loose handles for getting at what it means:

You are a postmodern person. Really, unless you died sometime in the 1970's, you're a pomo. Don't take offense. It's not a bad thing. It's no worse than being a Redskins fan – not by a long shot. You probably don't even recognize all the ways that you're a pomo, but on the spectrum from Modern to postmodern, you've been sliding toward the pomo side since you started shaving. You'll keep moving that way until you die -- then you'll have to deal with another big culture shock, one way or the other.

Truth is relative. Don't get all bent out of shape over this one. You've always believed this, you're just too afraid to admit it. Do you believe the truth claims of Islam, or of Hinduism, or of Scientology? I expect that you don't. You have always reserved the right to personally dismiss the truth claims of other people, and they've always reserved the right to do so right back at ya. The whole "truth is relative" philosophy is really just a nifty way of saying that we don't all agree and that no one truth claim can be proven. Another way of thinking of it is that pomos believe truth to be internal rather than external.

But wait a minute!?!?!? Didn't Jesus say that *he* was the truth, and didn't he mean that he was the truth for everyone? Yea, but you didn't believe him until you believed him, and he wasn't the truth for you until you believed him. Chew on that for a while and think about your neighbor while you do.

There's more to the world than meets the eye. Moderns interacted with the world according to a scientific mindset. They proved things through observation and such. If you couldn't prove it, it wasn't real. Pomos don't buy that. They know that most of what gets us through life cannot be seen, poked, prodded or sniffed. They are much more into the spiritual, metaphysical, and intuitive stuff. Now Christians should not have a problem with this one. But most do.

Neat is usually a lie. Face it, life is complicated and most of the little systems we construct to simplify life somehow falsify things. For instance, there is not a great big line that separates the USA and Mexico. Though we put up fences, elect different governments, and pass tariff laws, the two groups of people (Americans and Mexicans) are intricately connected. We claim that two nations exist, but that's an oversimplification. Millions of people exist. Some give allegiance to a red-white-blue flag, others to a red-white-green one, and others to neither or both. But what makes someone a Mexican or an American? Is it place of birth? What a little piece of paper says? Where they live? To define what it means to be an American will distort the truth, because it's just not that easy. The same is the case with a lot of things that we try to classify, categorize and label. Life is too messy for neat systems to be very accurate. They may be helpful, but it's only because they enable us to cease thinking about complex things for a while.

Change is now exponential and unprogressive. If I hear one more person say, "Things have always changed, that's nothing new," I think I'll puke. Just reading that sentence makes me taste the pizza from lunch. Pomos understand the world as a place of constant flux and blur. The pace of change is now so high that we can no longer make easy comparisons to the changes of the past. Change used to be incremental: one change led to another, which led to a third. Change is now exponential: this one change will lead to twelve others, each of which will lead to twelve more – all happening in less than a month. Not only that, but change may not even be leading us anywhere in particular. Though pomos strive for change out of good reasons and intents, they are not misguided enough to think that humanity is "progressing" because of these changes. Moderns liked to think that we were getting somewhere (overcome nature, overcome the uncivilized, win the war against polio, and so on). Postmoderns seek change so that it will help us get through today. Tomorrow we'll have to innovate and recreate so as to adapt to those conditions. For pomos, nothing gets solved for very long.

We could go on and on, but those 5 statements will at least give you a foggy glimpse of what postmodernism means. Isn't that nice? Maybe, but the question you really want to ask is "What does it matter?" I told you that you were a pomo (pomos are very pragmatic).

Specifically, what does it matter for a minister of the Christian gospel? Obviously it matters a lot and in a lot of different ways. After all, postmodernity is a huge shift in the way people think, behave, and relate. It ought to effect how ministry is done in, among, and by pomos. Now it would be very non-pomo of me to give you a list of hard and fast rules for doing ministry in a postmodern world. If you see such a list, burn it and eat the ashes. But I think we can agree that there are some general ideas for how ministry ought to adapt to what we know thus far. Here are four broad strokes for ministering with/as pomos:

1. SERMONS

Quit preaching them. Seriously, quit preaching them the way you've been doing it. Sermons that explain the truths of Jesus will get about two inches out of your mouth before becoming totally useless. Sorry to tell you, but nobody gives a rip what you think about Jesus. They care a lot about Jesus, and they want to know him, but they don't really want to know what you think about him. That's because your experience with Jesus cannot be transmitted to them. Your truth is not their truth.

So don't preach explanation-based sermons. If you persist, pomos will laugh at you and then they will laugh in your face. That's because pomos believe that preachers who have "figured it out" and are now imparting their great knowledge to the poor, uneducated fools in the pews ought to be taken out and shot. This was a hard lesson for me (I'll show you the bullet wounds!). I like being right, and I like being considered an "expert." But what does it mean to be an expert on God? How preposterous! How humbling.

Maybe the goal of preaching is not to get facts A, B, and C from the preacher's head to the congregation's collective head, but to let God proclaim himself and let the mortals deal with it. This will be uncomfortable as hell (that's a theological statement, so quit your crying), but it's needed. It will be uncomfortable because we like to wrap up things before noon on Sunday. We

present an issue, connect it with Jesus and then spout out a resolution – all in twenty minutes. Face it, you cannot explain the Trinity (or any other real topic) in a sermon or a series of sermons or a lifetime of sermons. It cannot be explained! But the truth of the Trinity can be encountered, and that's what the pomo sermon will do: it will provide an encounter with truth.

Practically speaking, I think this means that sermons will be more narrative. In other words, you will tell the story that's in the Bible and then begin the process of dealing with it. You might use the sermon to introduce people to various characteristics of God as a way of getting them started. But for heaven's sake, don't finish the conversation for them.

And for the love of God, don't use a sermon to give pomos five steps to a better marriage (or happiness, or prayer, or winning on the stock market, or whatever). This might work for late Moderns, but pomos will take this kind of stuff for what it is: empty, inauthentic, oversimplified crap.

The same is true for powerpoint-based outlines for your sermon. That kind of stuff just comes off as unreal. Life is not fill in the blank. God is not fill in the blank. A more productive use of technology for sermons is to use a single projected image as a backdrop while you preach without ever making reference to it. For instance, if your text is on the birth of Jesus, use an image of a newborn with all the gunk and blood and stuff. That's real.

2. WORSHIP

Again, be authentic. Obviously worship is not off the cuff, but a super well-choreographed praise team routine is an abomination. And if your praise team wears matching shirts, just go ahead and bring out the barf bags. How fake. The only thing more fake is that insipid "wrist clap" that the praise team member does while she holds the microphone. That kind of stuff belongs in Branson, Missouri or Leisure World, California.

Pomos don't want musical performances, but they do believe that music is an avenue to God. They really do. They also believe that drama, dance, art, pop culture and nature can be avenues to God—but only if these are done with authenticity. There's that word again! To help make worship authentic, try to make the music an experience more than a performance. Allow musicians to dress like the people who aren't on stage. Allow them to speak like normal people, not in some Howdy-Doody, "Gee, it's great to be here," sort of voice.

You can also use technology to bring people closer to God in worship. The best use of technology in worship that I've seen recently was at Sanctuary church in Capistrano Beach, CA (www.sanctuarychurch.com). They put the words to the songs up on screens, but the background image was a video of a changing nature landscape. The video took you into nature and provided a wonderful backdrop to the words of praise that we were singing to the God who created the landscapes. They did this by using two video inputs, which enabled them to change the words on the screen without affecting the background video. It was very cool, but not cool for cool's sake. It helped us worship God. The same needs to be true for video clips, drama, etc. If it doesn't help people think about God or connect with God, then don't do it. I've seen way too many movie clips and drama skits that were done just for the sake of doing it.

By the way, don't be afraid to bring secular stuff into worship. For pomos, all the world is sacred. That song by Kid Rock might be just the voice of God in today's service. At the same time, don't devoid the service or worship space of that which you might consider sacred. Instead, go ahead and use sacred symbols like the cross or religious art to help people encounter God in worship. Pomos tend to have not demarcated the world into sacred and secular categories, so don't bring in that kind of thinking to your worship or you'll miss providing some avenues to God.

3. EDUCATION

The unchurched pomos that I've encountered are eager learners. They want to know about God, Jesus, the Bible, and even the history of the church. Now they also want to learn about Feng Shui, voodoo, yoga, and how to brew their own beer, but that's beside the point. These are people who hang out at Borders Book Stores for crying out loud. Obviously they are sponges. However, they are not sponges who will sit idly by and let you spout out a lecture without ever asking a question or considering your claims. In fact, I think one of the keys is for us to use language such as "These are the claims of Christianity," not "This stuff is true and if you don't believe it you're going to burn in ..." – well, you get the point.

Since all truth is proposed truth prior to being personal truth, churches will need to help pomos take ownership of the truth claims of Christianity. This won't be easy or quick, and I think the process will hinge on relationships.

Give pomos a set of relationships within which they can explore the truths of the gospel. This set of relationships used to be referred to as a "church." However, that term has shifted in meaning and now means "a place where people who know it all come to remind themselves of what they know." That's not really the setting we're going for. Instead, you might create safe communities where spiritual topics can be discussed. The key is for the relationships to be safe, honest, and beneficial. This is a community where people can test, try and practice the whole "love thy neighbor" thing. It's a community that mutually explores the claims of Christianity and is really in search of meaningful knowledge.

4. MINISTRY

Pomos are doers. The only way that pomos are going to grow closer to God is through following Jesus. This means that the church must seek out ways to let people follow Jesus and not just sit around and talk about him. Remember, experience is the means of making proposed truth turn into personal truth. Churches who build Habitat houses and stuff like that are giving postmodern people a grand opportunity to follow Jesus.

This creates a big rub though. The problem is that a lot of people might join you in ministry and not join you for the Sunday morning check-in. If you're measuring your success based on the pew population, you're going to lose. However, if you measure success based on people who do what Jesus did and do it in the name of Jesus, you might just win.

It might even be that the old ratios are reversed. That is, it used to be that only a portion of the worshipers got involved in ministry. In these postmodern times, you might have far more people doing ministry than attending worship. I have a friend who complained of a family in his church who helped in every ministry imaginable but who wouldn't "join the church." It seems that we might have to redefine what it means to be a part of the church to include those who minister and not just those who sign up.

Okay, there's a stab at why all of this really matters. But here's the kicker: half of what you just read is wrong, and I really don't know which half. You see, this whole pomo thing is really so imprecise that none of us really know what we're talking about. We can't speak too boldly about what postmodernity means or what it matters. In fact, I say be aware of those persons who peddle their easy answers to the pomo situation!

However, our pooled ignorance need not breed fear or apathy because there is a fundamental truth on which we can rest, namely this: pomos are people and God loves people and God has called/equipped/empowered the church to reach people (including pomos) in his name. The church *will* succeed in reaching pomos because God will not be stopped – not even by his church. So, fear not. Postmodernity simply means that God is going to use a whole new set of methods to bring people into his saving presence. Knowing this matters a great deal for those who want to be onboard with God as he pulls this off.

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