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Postmodernism: An Adventist Assessment and a Response

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Introduction

Contemporary Western society finds itself in the midst of an intellectual mood with an associated cultural expression which is generally called postmodernism. Its intellectual dimension has philosophical links, being anticipated already in the 19th century in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Indeed, among postmodernism's illustrious philosophical progenitors and contemporary practitioners, we could conceivably include such names as Johann Fichte, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. [1] The cultural significance of postmodernism, however, lies in the fact that it has successfully transcended the realm of academia to which it was largely confined during the 1970's, to find expression in contemporary architecture, art, theatre, fiction, film-making and television.

As an intellectual outlook with a strong philosophical base, postmodernism becomes a phenomenon which has significant implications for the discipline of theology. It is a fact in the history of Christian theology that theologians are wont to undertake the theological task within the intellectual framework of philosophy.[2] Consequently, postmodernism is already influencing the expression of theology, especially in the evangelical world. Even a cursory look at the output of evangelical theological works reveals the seriousness with which the postmodern challenge is taken.[3] These works reveal contrasting positions on the relative value of the postmodern situation for evangelical theology.

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[1] For a brief discussion of the prelude to postmodernism and its contemporary philosophers, see Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996); see also Fernando L. Canale, *Back To Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundation of Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001):4-7.

[2] Canale, *Back To Revelation-Inspiration*, 5.

[3] See the following short sampling of publications: Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001); idem, *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Futures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000); David S. Dockery (ed.), *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton, Ill.: BridgePoint, 1995); Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996); Terrence W. Tilley, *Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995); David Ray Griffin, *Varieties of Postmodern Theologies* (Albany, N.Y.:State Univ. of New York, 1989)

The need for critical assessment of postmodernism is no less urgent with regards to Adventist theology. In my view, such an assessment of postmodernism must involve the following logical moves. A formal outline of postmodernism from the point of view of its philosophical foundations ought to be followed, first, by a general theological analysis of its implications, to be completed by particular application to Adventist theology. The advantage in undertaking a philosophical analysis of postmodernism's foundations is that it provides structural components which help in clearly outlining the foundational issues at stake in the debate.

Postmodernism: Philosophical Foundations

Intellectually, postmodernism encompasses a variety of viewpoints; yet in spite of the several positions, there seems to be agreement on the fact that foundationally, the postmodernism outlook is anti-modern,[4] particularly in its rejection of 'Enlightenment rationality.' It is for this reason that scholars sometimes classify varieties of postmodernism on the basis of their degree of departure from modernism.[5] To outline the philosophical foundations of postmodernism, we must first delineate the philosophical foundations of modernism from which postmodernism seeks to depart.

Philosophical Foundations of Modernity

Kevin J. Vanhoozer distinguishes modernity from premodernity by reference to what he considers to be their respective *first philosophy*.[6] By first philosophy Vanhoozer has in mind the Aristotelian *first principle*, the preliminary, all-consuming question. In Vanhoozer's view, whereas premodernity's first philosophy was *metaphysics*, everything changed with the advent of the Enlightenment and modernity. The foundational issue with modernity had to do with *epistemology*, namely, the nature and the possibility of

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[4] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 12
[5] Millard Erickson, following David Ray Griffin, identifies four main postmodern theologies on the basis of the degree of their radical departure from modernity: deconstructive postmodernism, liberationist postmodernism, constructive postmodernism, and conservative or restorative postmodernism. See Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 99-103; David Ray Griffin, *Varieties of Postmodern Theologies* (Albany, N.Y.:State Univ. of New York, 1989), 1-7. Thomas C. Oden, however, refuses to apply the term postmodern to philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault and Rorty, preferring to call them ultramodernists, see Thomas Oden, "After-Modern Evangelical Spirituality" *Concordia Journal* 20 (1994):12-14.
[6] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 15-17.

knowledge. We may conveniently begin the delineation of modernity's philosophical foundations with epistemology.

Modern Epistemology.

The Enlightenment which marked the beginning of the modern period involved both a philosophical and scientific shift in outlook. The roots of the philosophical revolution are generally credited to Rene Descartes (1596-1650) who is often referred to as the father of modern philosophy. Besides shifting the focus of philosophy from metaphysics to epistemology, Descartes laid the foundation of modern epistemology in his concerns about the *nature* of knowledge and the *method* to attain that knowledge. Out of Descartes epistemological concerns came forth issues and ideas that would characterise modern epistemology.

First, on the nature of knowledge, Descartes is clear that what he is seeking is a *universal* type of knowledge, not only in the sense of what is *true for everyone*, but also in the sense of what is *true for all areas* of knowledge.[7] Descartes argumentation leads him to the conclusion that the principles for such knowledge can be found only in the sciences. Furthermore, Descartes is concerned to obtain knowledge that is *certain and indubitable*, which knowledge he found only in the disciplines of arithmetic and geometry. These disciplines represent Descartes' models of true knowledge. According to Descartes, an inquiry into the nature of these two disciplines will show how such knowledge is obtained: experience and deduction. Finally, Descartes shows scepticism towards knowledge that is commended to one by others. In this Descartes' turn to the *self* becomes acute, giving us the picture of the individual knower who refuses knowledge except that which is personally verifiable.[8]

On the method of obtaining the knowledge he is seeking, Descartes points out that there are only two acts of the intellect by which we obtain truth: intuition and deduction. Intuition is a *conception* of a 'pure and attentive mind' arising only from *reason*, while deduction is a *necessary conclusion* derived from other facts that are certainly known. Of the two, Descartes' shows preference for intuitive knowledge, a preference which is

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[7] Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 54.
[8] Ibid., 55.

related to the certainty that Descartes accords his starting point of *methodic doubt* as will be shown shortly. The priority of intuition to deduction brings to view a cardinal aspect of modern epistemology, namely *foundationalism*, which implies the search for an absolutely certain starting point on which knowledge will not only rest, but also guarantee its truth. On his own part, Descartes' application of his *methodic doubt* eventually led him to what in his view constituted the indubitable, certain foundation of knowledge, namely, the 'autonomous thinking self.' The consequence of this find is that given the indubitability of the thinking self, all 'clear' and 'distinct' intuitions of this *self* are true.

The primary role of *reason* in modern epistemology needs to be emphasised, if for no other reason, for the fact that it is the source of intuition which alone gives clear and distinct ideas that are true. The Enlightenment concept of reason, however, meant more than just a human faculty. In other words, the modern concept of reason was not simply the human faculty with which facts and ideas are organised, analysed and evaluated. Rather, the modern concept of reason recalled the Stoic concept of *logos*; that reality has a fundamental order and structure which is evidenced in the human workings of the mind. The human mind, according to this view, is endowed with *innate* ideas, and these ideas are somehow related to the nature and structure of reality. It is this correspondence between the structure of reality and the inner workings of the mind that made the men and women of the Enlightenment bestow reason with such omni-competence. Two implications flow from the foregoing observation: belief in the *objective rationality* of reality, and confidence in human ability to gain *cognition of the foundational order* of the universe.

In due course, John Locke (1632-1704) rejected the notion of innate ideas and argued that all our ideas proceed from experience, i.e., either sensation or reflection. Yet, even in this rejection, Locke's innovation did not depart fundamentally and formally from Enlightenment *foundationalism*, which instead of depending on indubitable first principles derived introspectively (Descartes), is made to begin with sense experience (Locke). The empiricist uses reason instrumentally, whereas for the rationalist, reason is a source of knowledge. Nevertheless, what we have here is the divide between *rationalist foundationalism* (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz), and *empiricist*

foundationalism (Locke, Hume, Berkeley) which will result in ongoing debates to culminate in the resolution by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

On his part, Kant's particular contribution was to combine the valuable insights of both rationalist and empiricist foundationalism. Kant's thought on epistemology represented a revolutionary moment in the history of Western thought. By his compromise, he relieved Western philosophy of the scepticism that Hume's criticisms had spawned. A detailed account of Kant's philosophy is not particularly relevant to our purposes in this essay, except to note, first, that his compromise completed the Enlightenment's turn to the subject. Kant elevated the status of the thinking subject by showning that the subject is significantly active in the constitution of meaning. Both intuition and sensation are at work in the constitution of meaning. Basically, Kant's theory of cognition was to show that knowledge results from the united operations of intuitions (from sensible objects) and conceptions (creations of the mind).[9] This way, Kant was able to show the complementarities of the empiricist and rationalist insights. On the other hand, Kant was able to achieve this synthesis at the expense of denying the subject's structural ability to cognize the *nuomena*. Cognition concerned the realm of phenomena. By this distinction, Kant had already sowed the seed of nonfoundationalism which would inevitably blossom in the course of time.

Key Modern Epistemological Principles. From the brief outline of the development of modern epistemology given above, we may now delineate some key fundamental epistemological principles of the modern period.

1. Objective rationality. The orderly structure of nature calls to view its laws. The correspondence between reason and nature's laws meant that by eliminating subjective and personal factors from the knowing process certain and objective knowledge was possible. Such knowledge may be known descriptively, and truth is that which accurately represents the reality described; hence modernity's preference for the *correspondence theory* of truth.

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[9] Kant writes, "Our knowledge springs from two main sources in the mind, the first of which is the faculty or power of receiving representations (receptivity for impressions); the second is the power of cognizing by means of these representations (spontaneity in the production of conception." See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: J. M. Dent &Sons, 1959), 62.

2. Referentialism. Implied in modernity's descriptive approach is a certain view of language, namely, that language is *representational*. In other words, language refers to, and represents facts of reality. Thus both Locke and the *logical atomists* shared a referential view of language.

3. Harmony. A logical consequence of the rational structure of reality is the principle of harmony. This harmony is based on the overall rational and orderly structure of the universe. The idea of harmony also implies a value judgment on knowledge, namely, that knowledge is good and signals progress.

4. Individualistic autonomy. Modernity spawned the individual knower as the model of the knowing process. On the other hand, autonomy did not mean lawlessness since universal natural laws were presupposed. Individualistic autonomy, therefore, imposed an intellectual epistemological obligation on individuals to assess truth for themselves.

5. Foundationalism. Foundationalism addresses the structure of justifiable knowledge, namely, that all beliefs are justified by building on indubitable and incorrigible, bedrock foundational beliefs.

Important as these epistemological principles were in sustaining the Enlightenment project, the epistemological revolution initiated by Descartes found a needed corresponding ontological revolution in the scientific explorations of Isaac Newton (1642-1727).

Modern Metaphysics

Although modernity's first philosophy was clearly epistemological, there was continuing interest in questions about the nature of reality as should have already been evident in our outline of the development of modern epistemology.

First is the nature of physical reality. In science, Newton did what Descartes had done for philosophy in trying to put science on a certain foundation. In Newton's view the natural order of nature could be described mathematically. It is clear that Newton's approach had an implied understanding of the make up of physical reality, namely, that the world is made up of hard indestructible *particles* called atoms. These are objects of

sense experience whose separations and motions are accountable for observable changes in nature; hence the mechanical view of classic modern physics. Newton's ideas on the nature of reality laid the foundation for the predominant Newtonian physics during the modern period.

On the nature of ultimate reality, although modern philosophy exhibited pluralistic tendencies, it can be argued that it was fundamentally *monistic*. Monism is the view that reality is fundamentally one as process, structure, substance or ground.[10] Such was the case of Hegel whose *idealism* mirrored the world as the unfolding of an all-inclusive spirit realizing itself. To the extent that modernity classically interpreted Being as *timeless*[11], one may make the case that even Descartes was a monist in a fundamental sense, in spite of his dualistic tendencies.

Philosophical Foundations of Postmodernity

The point was made earlier that in spite of the many expressions of postmodernity, there seems to be consensus on the fact that foundationally, postmodernity is anti-modern. Having completed a brief outline of the philosophical foundations of modernity, we may now outline postmodernity's philosophical foundations. Summarily, postmodern philosophy rejects the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of modernity outlined above.

Epistemologically, postmodernity represents a rejection of the Enlightenment's quest for 'objective knowledge' and its attendant foundationalism and referentialism.[12] This criticism of modernity's quest of objective knowledge lies at the foundation of Jacques Derrida's project of *deconstruction*. Key to this project is the rejection of *logocentrism,* "the idea that understanding, meaning, can be given a fixed reference point by grounding it in logos, some fixed principle or characteristic of reality; in other words, in a presence."[13] Against modern foundationalism, postmodernity inclines towards *holism.* Instead of the picture of knowledge as a building which develops from solid

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[10] Milton D. Nunnex, *Chronological and Thematic Charts of Philosophies and Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986), 19.
[11] Fernando L. Canale, *Back To Revelation-Inspiration,* 7.
[12] See Nancey Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology" *Christian Scholars Review* 26/2 (1996):185-193.
[13] Erickson, *Truth or Consequences,* 115.

foundations, Willard O. Quine's picture of a web or net is preferred.[14] Holism means that instead of beliefs being grounded on solid foundations, beliefs are supported by their ties to neighbouring beliefs, and ultimately to the whole. With holism, no beliefs are inherently unrevisable. In the words of Murphy, "beliefs differ only in their 'distance' from experience, which provides the 'boundary conditions' for knowledge. The requirement of consistency transmits experiential control throughout the web."[15] Thus, the hallmarks of holism are corrigibility, perspectival plurality, and process.[16]

Other epistemological shifts in postmodernity may be noted. First, there is a shift of interest from meaning as *reference* to meaning as *use*. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L Austin laid the foundation for the new philosophy of language. The early Wittgenstein's view of language was similar to that of the logical positivists: language state facts. The latter Wittgenstein, however, construed language along the lines of games. Each use of language constitutes a game with its own rules. Thus a sentence, potentially, may have as many meanings as the contexts in which it is used. Meaning is a function of language's role in a system of conventions: linguistic and non-linguistic, of practices, and performances. Meaning is contextual, and language does not necessarily aim at an objective truth-status of a phenomenon. Second, in postmodernism, there is an "incredulity towards metanarratives,"[17] which is to say that the Enlightenment quest for universal knowledge on the basis of reason is abandoned.[18] The issue about postmodernity and metanarratives is an important one. Under modernity, reason exercised a magisterial role to rule in or out what counted as justifiable knowledge. It is in this sense that Enlightenment rationality constituted a metanarrative. In postmodernity, however, all human knowledge, it is claimed is historically contextual, local and particular, yielding what has been called the *contextual thesis.*[19] In the view of Diogenes Allen, with an embargo on all metanarratives, the conclusion is inevitable that

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[14] Ibid., 192.

[15] Ibid. See also W.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *Philsophical Review* 60 (1951): 20-43.

[16] See Richard Shusterman, "Beneath Interpretation," *The Monist* 75 (1990), 187.

[17] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): xxiii-xxv.

[18] James K.A Smith, "A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited," *Faith and Philosophy* 18/3 (2001):353-368.

[19] Keith Yandell, "Modernism, Post-Modernism, and the Minimalist Canons of Common Grace," *Christian Scholars Review* 27 (1997),19

"every understanding of reality is a function of history and culture."[20] Furthermore, Allen observes, "this relativism is so potent that not only do we construct reality differently in different eras and societies, but it appears that there is little, if anything, to stop each individual from constructing reality in his or her own way."[21] The upshot of the so-called demise of metanarratives is clearly pluralism.

Metaphysically, postmodernity represents an anti-realist metaphysics. Anti-realism is the view that in so far as there are objects, they are dependent on our experience, thought and language[22]. In other words, we do not encounter a world that is simply given 'out there' but one that we actively *construct* by the use of concepts we bring to it.[23] This view is a rejection of the philosophical concept of *essentialism*, the idea that there are some ideal meanings. Derrida discusses his rejection of realism or essentialism with his notion of *difference*. Philosophically, metaphysical realism or essentialism requires a *center*, which in the history of metaphysics has been interpreted differently by different philosophical systems. Derrida, a major intellectual voice of postmodernism, rejects the notion of a center and notes that "henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sigh-substitutions come into play."[24]

Anti-realism is a necessary metaphysical correlate of epistemological holism, but developments in quantum physics have bolstered the anti-realist program. No more is science able to support Newtonian physics of particles as entities with fixed essences. Rather, physical reality is dynamic; the universe is not an existing entity that *has* a history, rather it *is* a history (it is a *multi*verse); the world is not so much a 'creation' as a 'creating.'[25]

The pluralism implied in the new understanding of science regarding physical reality, receives a philosophical echo in Martin Heidegger's reconstruction of the nature

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[20] Diogenes Allen, "Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism," *Christian Scholars Review* 23/2 (1993), 120.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Yandell, 18.
[23] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism,* 41
[24] Quoted in Erickson, *Truth or Consequences,* 118.
[25] Ibid., 53.

of ultimate reality.[26] Heidegger's philosophy constitutes a twentieth-century transition to postmodernism. Especially significant is his concept of *Dasein* as the essential representation of Being. As a temporal, relational way of *being-in-the-world, Dasein* marks a departure from classical philosophy's interpretation of Being as timeless. Philosophically, postmodernity's search for truth presupposes a temporal interpretation of the ground on which reality is to be understood, and Heidegger's existential philosophy helps provide the metaphysical grounding for such a move. However, the interpretation of ultimate reality in terms of temporality is a primordial presupposition which has immense hermeneutical significance. In the hands of postmodernism, the result is pluralism.

Postmodernism: Theological Implications

A strategic way to examine the implications of postmodernism for theology is to assess its hermeneutical significance. I use hermeneutics here in the broader sense of meaning-conditioning presuppositions in theological construction. The focus in this section will be on issues of epistemological and ontological nature.

Epistemology

A full account of the epistemological significance of postmodernism for theology would involve a cluster of issues around the concepts of revelation/inspiration, tradition, reason, and experience. Essentially, that approach would be a discussion of the effect of postmodernism principles on the four aspects of what has been called the Wesleyan quadrilateral of sources for theological reflection. On his part, Stanley Grenz criticizes the adequacy of Wesleyan Quadrilateral of sources, preferring instead to consider the Bible, the Christian heritage, and contemporary culture in theological reflection.[27] To give such a complete account of the issues, which would even go beyond the consideration of these sources to include as well the place of science in theology, is

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[26] Canale, *Back To Revelation-Inspiration*, 7.
[27] Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21ˢᵗ Century* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993):86-101.

clearly beyond the scope of this paper. For brevity, I will focus primarily on issues around the doctrine of Scripture, and the concept of truth.

Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Scripture

In a rather curious 'twist of fortunes' contemporary theology confronts an awakening from modernity's dismissal of authority and Scripture during the period of so-called progress, to the possibility of rethinking authority, including Biblical authority, during the current perceived crisis and malaise of postmodernity.[28] The opportunity to rethink biblical authority in postmodernity, however, is not exactly a return to a conservative, propositionalist doctrine of Scripture. Propositionalism and foundationalism are partners that cannot survive postmodernism without deconstruction. But how will concern for biblical authority sympathetic to postmodern epistemological interests look like? Two proposals are already in evidence: post-liberal and post-conservative theologies.

Post-liberal theology is generally associated with the so-called New Yale Theology.[29] One of the key distinctive themes of the Yale School is the place that is formally accorded Scripture in theological reflection. Noting the difference between liberalism and the Yale School's approach, Mark Wallace observes, "Scripture is not a reference point alongside 'common human experience' or the 'constructive imagination' for doing theology, but the definitive source for all theological work."[30] The nature of Scripture in post-liberal theology, however, is reflected in the school's vision of theology and doctrines as "grammars of the faithful rather ensembles of truth-claims or thematizations of inner feelings."[31] Scripture, therefore, functions simply as the 'preveniently authoritative text' to instantiate the rules and grammar of the faith community, and not necessarily to disclose truth claims. In this case Scripture is taken as a given of the tradition, which in Kevin Vanhoozer's view predisposes it to

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[28] Brian J. Walsh, "Reimaging Biblical Authority," *Christian Scholars Review* 26/2 (1996): 206-208.
[29] Mark I. Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," *Christian Scholars Review* 17 (1988):154-170.
[30] Ibid., 155.
[31] Ibid., 156. For discussion on the influence of Wittgenstein on the Yale School, especially on George Lindbeck, see Craig Hovey, "Truth in Wittgenstein, Truth in Lindbeck," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 56/57 (2001/2002):137-142. See also, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," in John G Stackhouse, Jr., (ed.) *Evangelical Futures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 77.

postmodernism's predilection to deconstruction through geneology.[32]   Furthermore,
Vanhoozer concurs with Alister McGrath in observing that this approach to Scripture
risks substituting divine revelation with corporate human insight with regards to the
origination of Scripture.[33] In this we see the postmodern preference of community to the
modern autonomous individual.

On the other hand, Vanhoozer's own postconservative theology reconstitutes the
Scripture principle in a way that is different from the old evangelical approach. At the
heart of Vanhoozer's attempt to reformulate the Scripture principle is a desire to clarify
the nature of the primacy of God's Word; this is his starting point. Taking his cues from
the world of theatre, Vanhoozer intends to think about biblical revelation in a way that
transcends what he calls the older "propositional" versus "personal" models.   He does
this because in his view, the Bible evidences an "integrated drama of creation with the
drama of redemption" in which God's interest is not simply giving propositions; neither
is it revealing Himself in a "deverbalizing" form. Rather God is involved in a
communicative action where His Word does things, and what he does also
communicates. On the basis of his dramatic understanding of redemption, then,
Vanhoozer basically adopts a functional view of Scripture. A functional view for
Vanhoozer obligates him neither to a propositionalist view of Scripture which would pose
a problem for him in view of the so-called demise of foundationalism, nor to a personalist
view which would be clearly liberal and not evangelical.[34] Nevertheless, his
reformulation of revelation as communicative action along the lines of philosophy of
language is intended in its application to Scripture to issue in an excess of meaning
beyond exegetical interpretation, albeit informed by it.[35]

In Stanley J. Grenz, we find another postconservative theologian who is dedicated
to revisioning evangelical theology. Like Vanhoozer, Grenz has a nuanced view of the

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[32] Geneology is Michael Foucault's method of disrupting the orders of the present which to him mask
political structures of power. See, Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 145-46.
[33] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 77.
[34] The connection between modern foundationalism and evangelical conservatism, as well as liberalism is
one that is almost taken for granted by postconservative evangelicals. See for example, Stanley J. Grenz
and John R. Franke (eds.), *Beyond Foundationalism*, 32-38.
[35] William C. Placher speaks of something like this when he describes revelation as an "encounter with a
God whose identity the biblical stories narrate." It is Placher's view that narratives resist the reduction of
persons to objects, thereby providing a richer sense of persons. See his "The Acts of God: What Do We
Mean By Revelation?" *Christian Century* 113/10 (1996):337.

Scripture principle: Scripture is normative "because it is the instrumentality of the Spirit."[36] The Spirit, through Scripture performs the illocutionary act of addressing humans, as well as a concomitant perlocutionary act of creating an "eschatological world" consisting of a new community of renewed individuals. The theological task, therefore, is to help the believing community to hear the Spirit's voice through the biblical text.

Epistemologically, it is quite clear that the effect of postmodernism on post-liberal and postconservative theologies is the tendency to take away from Scripture its cognitive and propositional aspects.

Postmodernism and the Nature of Truth

Nancey Murphy provides a helpful and concise version of post-liberalism's account of truth as presented by Lindbeck.[37] Linbeck talks about truth in three ways. At a basic level there is what he describes as *intrasystematic* truth. A particular belief is intrasystematically true when within the framework and context of the particular religion the belief is coherent and consistent. The other senses in which Lindbeck uses 'true' are categorical truth and ontological truth. Murphy sees the resemblance of these concepts to pragmatic theories of truth such as John Hick's. In her estimation, these concepts are inadequate substitutes for the conservative correspondence theory of truth primarily because they provide no criteria for the assessment of such truth claims.[38]

On his part, Wallace recognizes the Yale School's embrace of the 'scandal of particularity' about the biblical texts and Christian doctrines, but he subjects the school to a few searching questions. Regarding Christian doctrines Wallace queries, "Can we ever say that such claims are statements about the world 'out there' beyond the church's 'in here' appropriation of its founding persons and events? ...Does not theology also make *assertions* that refer *extra nos* to realities that exist independently of this grammar and these stories?"[39] Wallace notes that on these questions, the general answer of the Yale

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[36] Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic", in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (ed.) *Evangelical Futures*, 125.

[37] Nancey Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology" *Christian Scholars Review* 26/2 (1996):197-198

[38] Ibid., 198.

[39] Mark I. Wallace, "The New Yale Theology," 167.

School is that "the truth of theological discourse inheres in *how* the discourse is used, not in the reality to which it *refers.*"[40]

As we come to examine the truth question among postconservatives, we should observe that it is inextricably linked with the question of the goal of theology. . Traditionally, it is not unusual to break theology's goal into three formal tasks aimed at the achievement of the goal. Thus we distinguish constructive, apologetic and critical tasks.[41] The demise of propositionalism in postconservative theology is accompanied by a corresponding de-emphasis on doctrine. The result is that a careful look at postconservatism shows a fusion of the constructive and apologetic tasks as the critical task recedes into the background. As one reads the postconservative agenda, one is left wondering whether the question of heresy is still askable. On the one hand, the constructive effort does not seem to address the truth question directly, nor indeed can it. This is precisely because the goal of theology in postconservatism is not designed primarily to address the truth question. J. I. Packer has made the point quite clearly that up until the opening of the nineteenth century, all mainline practitioners of the discipline variously called *first principles, theology, dogmatics, systematic theology*, etc. had a unified understanding of the aim of the discipline. Theology was understood to function as a science, "to give the world a body of analysed, tested, correlated knowledge concerning God in relation to his creatures in general and to mankind in particular."[42] Packer notes also that systematic theology of the older type, more specifically the older evangelical type, shares this goal of theology. There is no question that postconservative evangelical theology, under the influence of postmodernism, intends to alter this classical evangelical understanding of the goal of theology. In both Vanhoozer and Grenz, but

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[40] Ibid.

[41] See E. Ashby Johnson, *The Crucial Task of Theology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), 60 ff. According to Johnson, the constructive task provides the church with constructional formulations through which the church apprehends and communicates its message. On the other hand, the apologetic task enables the church to speak to the secular world in a fashion which can be appreciated and understood by the critic. Finally, the critical task is the tool by which theology is able to distinguish "good" theology from "bad" theology. See also John B. Cobb, "Theological Data and Method" *Journal of Religion* 32-34 (1953/54): 213-214.

[42] J. I. Packer, "Is Theology a Mirage", in John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComiskey (eds.) *Doing Theology in Today's World* (Grand rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991): 23. This should not be construed to mean that theology was a purely cognitive activity. As Packer points out, the classical exponents know that theology "yields genuine knowledge of God, first cognitive and then relational, being based on God's own revelation of truth about himself as the lover, seeker, and Savior of lost mankind", 18.

more so for Grenz, theology has a pragmatic concern: for Vanhoozer, to facilitate the cultivation of phronesis[43], and for Grenz, to delineate the Christian experience-facilitating interpretive framework.[44]

On the other hand, the critical task, although not completely absent, lacks a strong critical principle. Vanhoozer provides two critical tests: faithfulness to the text, and fruitfulness; but this is after he has endorsed fallibilism, arguing after C. S. Pierce that the rationality proper to theology is a hermeneutic rationality involving "inference to the best explanation."[45] The endorsement of fallibilism should be understood in the context of postconservative, postmodernist epistemology, not in the context of the older style evangelical interpretation of a prior, acknowledged propositional text. The implication of this approach to pluralism should be quite obvious.[46] Grenz does recognize the critical task, yet there is no succinct statement or articulation of a critical principle.[47] The closest he comes to doing this is his discussion of the three motifs of Christian theology, which for him reflect what he calls the Christian "style,"[48] but this hardly goes far enough to answer the question of heresy in theology.[49] The Christian style comprises a trinitarian structure, a communitarian focus, and an eschatological orientation. In other words, theology is Christian not only when it simply adopts a Trinitarian understanding of the Being of God, but when the very explication of the community's belief structure is Trinitarian in nature. Second, since it is one's presence in

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[43] It is the view of Vanhoozer that biblical interpretation seeks knowledge of God that is neither *theoria* (knowledge of propositions) nor *technem* (product of instrumental reason) but *phronesis* (practical reason, prudence), See Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 81.

[44] Grenz' view of the goal of theology is influenced by his belief that religious experience is a function of a cognitive interpretive framework that "sets forth a specifically religious interpretation of the world." From this perspective, Christian theology becomes an intellectual effort to "understand, clarify, and delineate" the Christian community's interpretive framework. See Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic", in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (ed.) *Evangelical Futures*, 122-125.

[45] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 88-89.

[46] Compare this epistemological approach to the approach of revisionist theologians such as David Tracy. In Tracy's view, truth in a primordial sense is a manifestation. This position leads him to affirm a dialogical, conversational and hermeneutical approach to theology. In such a theological system, a claim to any manifestation necessary implies a claim to a relative adequacy for that interpretation. From this perspective, it would seem that one is able to capture only a moving point, never the whole. Although Tracy conceives of a move from a model of truth as primordial manifestation to truth as warranted consensus, there is always a process of re-evaluation. See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishing, 1987), 29.

[47] Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 18.

[48] Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic", in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (ed.) *Evangelical Futures*, 129-136.

[49] Ibid.

the Christian community that necessitates theological reflection, Community becomes the integrative motif, i.e. the theme around which all Christian theological foci should be understood and explored. Finally, the eschatological aspect of Christian theology which Grenz identifies as its orientating motif means that Christian theology does not deal with static realities, but realities that are linguistically and socially constructed, tending towards God's eternal *telos* for the creation. Thus Grenz queries: "How can Christian theology continue to talk about an actual world, even if it is only future, in the face of the demise of realism and the advent of social constructionism?"[50]

To summarize, postmodernity's "incredulity towards metanarratives" and its preference for contextual, local narratives necessarily translates into functional, holistic and pragmatic notions of truth. But as Murphy correctly observes, all holistic epistemologists face a similar challenge: the problem of competing, equally coherent systems.[51] It should be recalled, however, that the pressure towards a functional and pragmatic notion of truth in postmodernism is linked directly to its metaphysical presuppositions which incline it towards a *constructionist* view of reality. So what influence does postmodern metaphysics have on contemporary theological reflection?

Metaphysics

The critical issue that comes to the fore in assessing the impact of postmodern metaphysical views on theological reflection is the one regarding realism. Postmodernism signals a shift from an *objectivist* to a *constructionist* outlook on reality. The acuteness of this problem for Christian theology has been recognised. Allan G. Padgett, while not apparently endorsing common sense realism observes that "Christians will be (sophisticated) realists because they are theists. There is one God and therefore one world and one truth about that world (i.e., God's knowledge of the world)."[52] Mark Noll is more detailed. Raising the issue about the possibility of historical knowledge in traditional Christianity, Noll observes that it is the very foundation of Christianity that is

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[50] Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic", 135.
[51] Murphy, "Philosophical Resources for Postmodern Evangelical Theology," 197.
[52] Allan G. Padgett, "Christianity and Postmodernity," *Christian Scholars Review* 26/2 (1996), 131.

at stake in the crisis about realism.[53] The very existence of orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant is defined by purportedly historical events concerning an omnipotent deity who created out of nothing, called Abraham to be the father of all nations and delivered his descendants from slavery in Egypt in order to preserve his purposes. The story of Jesus' pre-existence, incarnation and Virgin birth, his death and resurrection are affirmed implicitly with a definite view of historical understanding.[54]

How has theological reflection been affected by this state of affairs? The post-liberal position is closely allied to their stand on the question of truth. For example, the reality-reference of the gospels, it is argued, should not be made to obscure the real issue of the stories which is to "narrate the literary identity of Jesus, not to refer to actual historic events."[55] In the case of the resurrection, for example, Wallace quotes Hans Frei as saying that the resurrection's status in the story is not that of "reference to an occurrence but simply the affirmation that Jesus' self-manifestation is in fact the self-manifestation of God."[56]

From the perspective of postconservatism, the programmatic direction is clearly perceived. Stanley Grenz sees the situation as calling for an evangelical theology that takes seriously the postmodern condition by moving away "from both realism and the metanarrative," while seeking to "gain insight from thinkers such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and George Lindbeck," without following their program in its entirety.[57] Vanhoozer's position is more nuanced but nonetheless relativistic. In his view, "we need to understand how the biblical authors thought about God, the world and themselves— not necessarily to use their *concepts* in our situation but to transfer the wisdom behind their judgment to our situation..."[58] (emphasis mine). Vanhoozer explicitly states that it would be incorrect to associate his position with common sense realism; "it is therefore more accurate to speak in terms of 'canon-sense realism.'"[59]

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[53] Mark A. Noll, "Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge," *Christian Scholars Review* 19/4 (1990), 392.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Wallace, 167.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic", 119.
[58] Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," 85.
[59] Ibid.

Mark Wallace's assessment of these postmodern metaphysical re-visionings is as pertinent as any.

> The immediate problem that confronts the church with this position is that it sets aside believers' ability to make first-order assertions about God and the world and second-order clarifications of these assertions in the form of doctrines. Yet by virtue of God's own self-communication to us, has not the church's self-understanding always been that it can and does make ontological truth-claims independent of believers' moral dispositions and level of religious commitment? Without this confidence, the church finds itself in a Donatist-like position in which truth and efficacy of the divine presence in the community is determined by the attitudes and behaviours of the community itself.[60]

Postmodernism and Adventist Theology: A Response

In a certain sense, everything that has been said so far is preliminary to what is to ensue. This paper has focussed on the philosophical foundations of postmodernism as a necessary undertaking in order to understand postmodernism in its essence. In a secondary move, the impact of postmodernism on the evangelical theological landscape has been outlined in a broad fashion via postliberal and postconservative theologies. Both theologies evidence a perceived theological opportunity in the resources furnished by postmodernism, and willingness among its practitioners to quarry these resources for theological reflection. Evidently, postliberal and postconservative theologians do not seem to detect fundamental inconsistencies between evangelical theology and postmodernism. Could the same strategy be adopted for Adventist theology? If not, why not? And what is Adventist theology? These questions will occupy our attention now.

Towards a Formal Characterization of Adventist Theology

For the purpose of this assessment and response, it will be helpful to attempt a formal characterization of Adventist theology. Yet this exercise is no simple undertaking. It is patently inadequate to simply say that Adventist theology is evangelical, or conservative or even biblical. The fluidity that attends these characterizations just makes them unhelpful.[61] Still, I consider it important to provide a

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[60] Wallace, 168.

[61] For a feel for the freight that may be brought to bear on these terms, see Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith*, (Berrien Springs, MI.: Andrews University Press, 1999):23-29.

formal designation of Adventist theology against which postmodernism may be assessed. What will be helpful is a more specific, less worn-out, and perhaps less provocative formal characterization of mainline Adventist theology.

Summarily, Adventist theology reflects a worldview that provides a window through which the total message of Scripture is clarified.[62] This worldview is captured by the concept of "the Great Controversy," a concept which envisages a moral cosmic conflict between God and Satan. In Holbrook's correct depiction, it is a concept that functions theological as an integrative motif: "Adventist understanding of the cosmic controversy has provided the church with a rational, integrated worldview. Every biblical teaching has its place and significance within its theological scope."[63] In its essence, the *great controversy* motif is a philosophy of *history*. The concept expresses at its very core a historical understanding of the Bible in which *historically*, the origin, progress and final disposition of sin is depicted. The concept also accords real *historical space* to the players in the cosmic drama: the sovereign Creator-God, Satan and other cosmic beings such as angels.

It is against the background of the foregoing conceptual summary of Adventist theology that I attempt to provide a concise formal characterization of Adventist theology. I am thinking about some designation that at a formal, conceptual level would be seen as quintessential to Adventist theology. In my view it is this: Adventist theology at its core embraces what I wish to call a *biblico-historical realism*. First, Adventist theology is *realist* in the sense that the reality it engages with does not depend on minds, and that knowing has for its objects realities that present themselves to minds. Furthermore, this reality may *not* be described as *naturalistic* in the sense that it does not confine its attention to the spatio-temporal which is accessible to the natural sciences. Thus Adventist theology is not reductionistic in that sense. Yet the historical realities that are dealt with in Adventist theology are treated as genuinely historical. Neither is this reality *pluralistic*, meaning that it finds a unifying cause or purpose in the world. Finally, Adventist theology is biblical in the specific sense that it embraces *biblical realism*, realism that is both historical and supra-temporal.

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[62] See Frank B. Holbrook, "The Great Controversy," in Raoul Dederen (ed.) *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, MD.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), 969.
[63] Ibid., 1003.

The significance of characterizing Adventist theology as embracing *biblico-historical realism* as defined above consists in the fact that without this formal, conceptual presupposition, core Adventist beliefs cease to make sense. Foundational Adventist doctrines about the Sabbath, the Second Advent, the Sanctuary, the judgment, conditional immortality, and the three angels' messages all have real meaning only in the context of *biblico-historical realism*.[64] A careful material analysis of these doctrines is beyond the scope of this paper, but such an analysis will reveal that each of these doctrines will stand or fall depending on whether *biblico-historical realism* is embraced or rejected. Ultimately, it is my view that postmodernism will be judged by Adventist theology against the backdrop of *biblico-historical realism*.

Postmodernism and "Biblico-Historical Realism"

The strategy adopted in this paper in response to postmodernism has been to evaluate it against a formal depiction of Adventist theology, which I have characterized as 'biblico-historical realism.' Postmodernism may be shown to be fundamentally inconsistent with Adventist theology, because it is inconsistent with Scripture from the specific formal perspective of Scripture's 'biblico-historical realism.'

Postmodernism's inconsistency with Adventist theology is evident in its view of reality. There are two main aspects to this problem: reductionism and pluralism.

First, postmodernism shows a naturalistic reductionism in the sense that it continues modernity's belief in a *self-contained universe*.[65] Postmodernity's commitment

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[64] The following statement expresses early Adventist understanding of the pillars of Adventist faith.

"There was much talk about standing by the old landmarks. But there was evidence they knew not what the old landmarks were.... They had perverted ideas of what constituted the old landmarks.

The passing of the time in 1844 was a period of great events, opening to our astonished eyes the cleansing of the sanctuary transpiring in heaven, and having decided relation to God's people upon the earth, [also] the first and second angels' messages and the third, unfurling the banner on which was inscribed, 'The commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.' One of the landmarks under this message was the temple of God, seen by His truth-loving people in heaven, and the ark containing the law of God. The light of the Sabbath of the fourth commandment flashed its strong rays in the pathway of the transgressors of God's law. The nonimmortality of the wicked is an old landmark. I can call to mind nothing more that can come under the head of the old landmarks," See E. G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 30-31.

[65] Diogenes Allen, "Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism," 121.

to a self-contained universe is a logical consequence of the contemporary linguistic element that is potently connected with the movement.[66] Of course, contemporary linguistic theory is a natural outworking of powerful philosophical ideas that were set in motion during the Enlightenment, especially with Kant's apparent 'agnosticism' towards the "nuomena.' Scripture has no such concept of a "self-contained universe," and Adventist theology will make no sense with this concept. Doctrines such as Jesus' *literal* second coming and the millennium require Adventist theology to presuppose the reality of an *open universe* in which nature and supernature co-mingle. Scripture presupposes the possibility of this co-mingling of nature and supernature and thereby renders possible a doctrine of *revelation/inspiration* that is not shackled by naturalistic presuppositions.

Second, postmodernism is pluralistic in the specific technical sense that reality has no unifying cause or purpose. I have already explored the metaphysical basis for this position in the postmodern shift from an *objectivist* to a *constructionist* view of reality. Postmodern pluralism, however, flies in the face of Adventist "great controversy" worldview, which is clearly teleological in terms of the final disposition of the cosmic moral conflict. In fact apocalyptic prophecies, from which core Adventist beliefs are formulated, are essentially teleological in nature.

Finally, there remains the difficult problem of reconciling postmodernism's incredulity towards metanarratives with the biblical view of truth. The Bible makes universal claims about God, Jesus Christ and salvation that may not be strictly construed as metanarratives in the sense of Lyotard.[67] Postmodernism's rejection of the Enlightenment metanarrative is a welcome development in showing that autonomous reason and the science based on it is not as objective as it claimed to be. The leap from the incredulity of Enlightenment metanarratives to metanarratives of any kind is problematic not only because postmodernism itself is a metanarrative, but because it runs contrary to the Scriptural outlook. Enlightenment metanarrative was based on reason, and assumed the existence of a universal point of view that the rational person could reach and from there deliver universal truth. Postmodernism rightly criticises this point of view, but fails to consider that reason does not exhaust the possible bases for the

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[66] Ibid.
[67] James K.A Smith, "A Little Story About Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited," 355.

formulation of metanarratives. As Allen observes, failure to consider this possibility makes postmodernism susceptible to the charge that it is "simply a variation of an old secularist creed, one in which unlimited self-determination is an absolute good, and in which the possibility of God is firmly excluded."[68] Shedding the commitment to a self-contained universe will constitute a significant condition of possibility in order for postmodernism to consider metanarratives of the kind such as Christianity offers. From the perspective of Adventist theology, the doctrine of the three angels' messages, for example, presents a foundational metanarrative based in revelation instead of reason.

Communicating Adventist Theology in a Postmodern World

We have maintained that Adventist theology cannot accommodate postmodern's methodological commitments, i.e. its foundation principles as discussed above, without self-destruction. Adventist theology's commitment to biblico-historical realism means that it embraces, doctrinally, real ideas that do not change with time, such as the bodily resurrection of the dead at the literal second coming of Christ. The question is how may this message gain hearing in a postmodern world without compromising it to the spirit of the times? The question is manifestly an apologetic one. What postmodern characteristics may safely be employed apologetically to the communication of Adventist theology? Obviously, one approach to watch carefully is the use of traditional Adventist terminological categories while providing them with a surplus of content beyond their customary meaning. Such is the case of some contemporary theological use of the concept *resurrection* in an existential sense, not as something that happens to physically dead bodies, but to psyches.[69] Millard Erickson discusses a few ideas that may be employed in communicating Adventist theology to a postmodern world.[70]

First, postmodernism's denial of reason as *the* metanarrative, makes room for the idea that humans may be reached in ways other than the rational. This not to say Adventist theology may be embraced without a commitment to its cognitive aspects. On the other hand, it may be that in a postmodern world, the chances of Adventist theology

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[68] Ibid., 124.
[69] Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 309.
[70] Ibid., 306-319.

gaining a favourable hearing may be enhanced not only by making it logically compelling, but also by working harder to make it emotionally attractive.

Second, postmodern preference for personal knowledge may mean that in communicating the Adventist message, a one-size-fits-all evangelistic method may not be the preferred way going forward. Furthermore, embodying the truth in the lives of proponents may give the message greater apologetic force. Ultimately, postmodernism, reminds us to be doubly committed to Christ's method of evangelism: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'" {MH 143.3}

Third, postmodernism thrives on imagination and creativity. Here, the significance of the media in promulgating the Adventist message may not be underrated. It should be remembered in this connection that postmodern ideas have been popularised mainly through the media. Stanley Grenz, for example, notes that the shift from the popular TV series *Star Trek* to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was symptomatic of the shift from modernism to postmodernism.[71]

Conclusion

The rapid embrace of postmodernism both culturally and intellectually speaks to some perceived positive values in the postmodern ethos. Hermeneutically, postmodernism forces us to recognise the role of presuppositions in all our interpretive activity. Along the same lines, we are made aware of the significance of the community in fashioning our belief structures. Reason is no longer judged to be as objective and omni-competent as once thought, thus giving room for other ways of knowing. At the more popular level, postmodernism's penchant for tolerance and inclusiveness, as well as its disdain of oppression, and its suspicion of the manipulative use of knowledge as power, commends it to contemporary Western societies. These positive values, however, mask some real radical foundational principles regarding the nature of knowledge and reality that are inimical to Christianity in general and Adventist theology in particular. We have drawn attention to some of these issues in this essay. But what we face here is

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[71] Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism,* 1-10.

not a choice between the positive values of postmodernism and Adventist theology. There is no reason, in my view, to argue that the positive values in postmodernism cannot have resonance in Adventist theology. Tolerance, compassion, community etc. are supremely biblical themes that can, and should be reflected in Adventist theology both practically and intellectually.