

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM

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Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Irving, TX

I. INTRODUCTION

Evangelical Postmoderns embrace doubt. They aren't sure God exists. Hence they aren't sure the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus is the Savior, that there is life after death, that they have everlasting life, etc.

Evangelical Postmoderns put a high premium on *experience*. Indeed, it is not surprising that many Evangelical Postmoderns are Charismatic in their worship and practice.

This emphasis on experience invades the way in which they evangelize and in their understanding of assurance.

Before we tackle the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism, let's first review what Postmodernism and Evangelical Postmodernism are.

II. POSTMODERNISM IS DOUBT

The modern era, the one before the Postmodern era, was an age of reason and rationalism and experimentation.

Generally the modern era is held to have started with the Industrial Revolution (or the Enlightenment) and to have ended around 1945 with the end of WW2.

A person with a modern mindset believes that there are lots of absolute truths today.

The modern would say that 2 plus 2 equals 4, the earth is not flat, the boiling point of water at standard pressure is 100 degrees Celsius, that George Bush is President of the United States, etc.

Postmoderns do not think that way. Nothing is certain except that nothing is certain.

Nihilism, the idea that life makes no sense and that there is no real meaning in life, is the philosophy of Postmoderns.

III. EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM IS EXPERIENTIAL, WITH ALL OUR DOUBTS SUPERSIZED

Evangelicals with a modern mindset still believe that God exists, that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, that the Bible is without error, that there is life after death, that there is heaven and hell, etc.

Evangelicals with a *Postmodern* mindset are not sure if God exists. They aren't sure if Jesus rose bodily from the dead. They believe the Bible is a human book with errors in it. They are not sure if there is life after death.

In his book, *The Next Reformation*, Dr. Carl Raschke urges Evangelicals to embrace Postmodernism. Indeed, that is essentially the subtitle of his book: *Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*.¹

Raschke has the academic credentials for his quest, having a Ph.D. from Harvard in the Philosophy of Religion. He is chair of the department of religious studies at the University of Denver.

Raschke says, "Postmodernity is all our doubts supersized."²

Evangelical Postmodernism places a high premium on skepticism and doubt. Evangelical Postmoderns view those who are sure of things as being arrogant and out of touch with reality.

They really are opposed to the idea that we can be sure of something simply because the Bible says it is true. Indeed, according to Evangelical Postmoderns faith and doubt *always coexist*. The Evangelical Postmodern is not sure of anything.

Thus Evangelical Postmoderns often speak of their *convictions*, by which they mean things which they affirm as true, though they realize they may not be true. Whenever they speak of what they *believe*, they do not mean things they are sure of. They instead mean things which they have convictions about, even though they doubt that these convictions are true.

If this sounds confusing to you, then you have the heart of Evangelical Postmodernism. It is all our doubts supersized.

¹Dr. Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

² *Ibid.*, 174.

IV. CHRISTIAN CONVERSION IS AN EXISTENTIAL ENCOUNTER, NOT BELIEVING IN JESUS FOR EVERLASTING LIFE

As you might imagine, such a view has a dramatic impact on evangelism. An Evangelical Postmodern does not focus on certain truths that must be believed. He does not focus on the guarantee of life that can never be lost to all who simply believe in Jesus.

Raschke cites the late Christian songwriter and singer Rich Mullins as a paradigm of what a Postmodern Christian should be like. In the course of his discussion of Mullins, Raschke indicates what a person must do to become—with the emphasis on an *ongoing process of becoming*—a Christian:

Mullins in the most radical way challenged both Christian literalism and legalism. He constantly stressed what the philosopher Kierkegaard had described as the task of “becoming” a Christian, as opposed to “being” a Christian. Becoming a Christian requires intense faith and spiritual discipline. It has little to do with intellectual conviction and even less with outward evidence of moral purity and perfection. Becoming a Christian, as Kierkegaard explained with irony, is not climbing a ladder of spiritual, let alone material, “success.” It all comes down to submitting oneself constantly to God through confession of our failures and presumptions and in taking what Kierkegaard himself referred to as the “leap of faith,” a leap into the fearful and unknown.³

A paragraph later Raschke continues:

Mullins testified that he was a Christian because he had “encountered God” in the many people who had “manifested (in many ‘unreasonable’ ways) His presence.” He [Mullins] added: “I am a Christian, not because someone explained the nuts and bolts of Christianity to me, but because there were people who were willing to be nuts and bolts. Through their obedience to the truth and not necessarily through their explanation of it, they held it together so that I could experience it and be compelled to obey.”⁴

³ Ibid., 162-63.

⁴ Ibid., 163.

In a Postmodern context one *becomes a Christian* over time by encountering God through others who are themselves becoming Christians.

The issue is not doctrine to be believed. Indeed, one must make a leap of faith into the fearful and unknown. While it supposedly has little to do with intellectual conviction *and even less with outward evidence of moral purity and perfection*, yet the way one becomes a Christian is *experiencing the truth and being compelled to obey it*.

V. THE GOSPEL IS NOT OTHER-WORLDLY OR ETERNAL: IT'S ABOUT PEACE OF MIND NOW

The ramifications of Postmodernism for Evangelism are truly frightening. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not proclaimed by Evangelical Postmoderns. It is considered "literalism and legalism."

Of course, since Postmoderns supersize their doubts and consider certitude to be a terrible thing, there is no possibility of believing statements like, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47) or "He who lives and believes in Me shall never die [spiritually]" (John 11:26). The best one could say is, "That's a nice story."

Many people who claim to be Evangelical Postmoderns identify themselves as charismatics or as part of the third wave. Raschke says, "Charismatic Christianity is...thoroughly Postmodern. It has what Max Weber called 'charismatic' as contrasted with 'rational' leadership."⁵ In his book on *The Next Reformation*, Raschke tells of the evening when, "I had been, as charismatics say, 'slain in the Spirit.'"⁶ He then noted, "Rosemarie helped me up. 'You are blessed, Brother Carl,' she said. We hugged each other. Most charismatics hug each other during services. I stood up straight. I was reborn."⁷

What does he mean when he says, "I was reborn"? Is he referring to the time when he was literally born again? Is that when he entered the family of God? No. He is borrowing Evangelical language to describe an experience he thinks he had.

The message he had heard that Sunday evening concerned "the fact that the mind of the flesh must be 'broken' to be restored by the Spirit"⁸.

⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁷ Ibid., 201-02.

⁸ Ibid., 201.

Raschke tells us nothing about Jesus or of the promise of everlasting life to those who believe in Him. Rather, he tells of an experience he had when he surrendered himself: “I was already shattered to the core.”⁹

VI. “SALVATION” FOR THE EVANGELICAL POSTMODERN IS A NEW AND TRANSFORMED LIFE HERE AND NOW

A. SALVATION ISN’T ABOUT ETERNAL BENEFITS SINCE MANY EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNS ARE NEAR UNIVERSALISTS

Another important aspect of the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism is what they believe a person gets. What is salvation?

Conservative Evangelicals think of “salvation” as gaining eternal life or being saved from hell. That is not necessarily what the Evangelical Postmodern thinks.

For one thing, some, if not many, Evangelical Postmoderns are either universalists or what some have called *near-universalists*. They believe, if we can use that term since they really aren’t sure of anything, that few, if any, will spend eternity in hell. All, or nearly all, will be in the kingdom of God, whether Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, agnostic, or atheist.

In a 1995 article entitled, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” Roger Olson says:

Closely connected to this nature-grace dialectic is the postconservative hope of near-universal salvation. Many postconservatives abandon exclusivism and opt for a new inclusivist view of salvation, believing it is possible for many who never hear the gospel message to be saved. Two theologians who have pioneered in this move are John Sanders and Clark Pinnock. Both imply that all cultures involve enough grace to lead people to a saving relationship with God if they seek it earnestly.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roger Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” *The Christian Century*, 3 May 1995, 408-83.

B. SALVATION IS PRIMARILY (OR EXCLUSIVELY) ABOUT PRESENT BLESSINGS

For at least some Evangelical Postmoderns “salvation” is a here-and-now deliverance from our fears, guilt, and hang ups. It is a sense of spiritual well being in the present life. It is not related to life after death.

It is probably safe to say that for most Evangelical Postmoderns the gospel is the good news that those who humble themselves before God will have a mighty experience that gives them inner peace. That peace can be maintained by regularly continuing to humble oneself before God.

Evangelical Postmoderns are very concerned about ecology. So in one sense individual “salvation” has as its aim the purification and cleansing of the entire earth. What Evangelical Postmoderns want is peace on earth through massive numbers of people encountering God.

Will McRaney at pastors.com has an article entitled, “*Sharing Christ with Postmoderns*.”¹¹ He gives a list of Postmodern evangelistic methods and one of them is “More earthly benefits—less eternal benefits.”

In the case of many Evangelical Postmoderns, some, if not many, are *solely* concerned with earthly, here-and-now benefits. There is little or no concern about eternal benefits because that is not a concern for many in Evangelical Postmodernity.

Pastor and author Kary Oberbrunner wrote an article entitled, “*Unpacking Postmodernism: Is a Postmodern Ministry Really What You Are After?*” In a chart comparing modernism and Postmodernism one of his points of comparison is “view of salvation.” Oberbrunner says the modernist views salvation as something which occurs at “a point in time,” where the Postmodernist views salvation as “a way of life.”¹²

In the concluding paragraph of an article called “*The Postmodern Gospel*,” written in January of 2006, Dr. James P. Danaher, who is the head of the Department of Philosophy at Nyack College, a Christian school sponsored by the Christian and Missionary Alliance Denomination, writes as follows:

The good news of the Postmodern Gospel is that, with the end of modernity, we now have an ever greater opportunity to or-

¹¹ Will McRaney, *Sharing Christ with Postmoderns* (2005); available from <http://www.pastors.com/en-us/sermons.htm>; Internet; accessed October 12, 2005

¹² Kary Oberbrunner, *Unpacking Postmodernism: Is a Postmodern Ministry Really What You Are After?* (2007); available from <http://www.purplenews.com/files/postmodernism.pdf>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

der our lives, not based upon understanding of some universal and objective truth, but rather upon an intimate understanding of a truth that is personal and subjective—indeed a truth that is a person (John 14:6).¹³

Note that there is no mention here at all of any benefits of the Post-modern gospel beyond the grave. What Danaher talks about is “an ever greater opportunity to order our lives.”

Note too that Danaher denies any universal or objective truth. If our truth is not universal, this implies there is another truth out there that allows other religions to find a way to order their lives around a different person, maybe Mohammed or Buddha.

At Nyack.edu there is an interview with Dr. Danaher that includes a section entitled, “*My conversion to life in Christ.*” Here is what Danaher says:

I had an experience with the Lord when I was eighteen, but it was an experience and not a conversion into a radically new and different life. Twelve years later, I had another God experience but again without the kind of surrender that marks the beginning of a transformed life. God was faithful still and, two year later, with a third experience, there was a surrender and the beginning of a transformation that has continued for the past twenty-five years.¹⁴

Note what is *missing* here: no reference to faith in Christ, no reference to eternal life or justification, and no reference to anything related to eternity.

Note what is *present* here: a repeated emphasis on “experiences with God,” repeated discussion of “a transformed life,” “a radically new and different life” is the aim, and surrender is the condition of this new life.

¹³ Dr. James P. Danaher, *The Postmodern Gospel* (2006); available from <http://www.globalmissiology.org/english/index.html>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

¹⁴ Dr. James P. Danaher, *My Conversion to Life in Christ* (2006); available from <http://www.nyack.edu/?include=FacultyInterview.php&id=35>; Internet; accessed August 1, 2007.

VII. BOTH FAITH AND THE OBJECT OF FAITH ARE NON-ESSENTIALS IN EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM

One way to summarize the gospel according to Evangelical Postmodernism is to recognize that it isn't about faith or the object of one's faith.

For the past few years there has been a lot of debate in Free Grace circles over precisely what the content of saving faith is. That debate is not occurring in Evangelical Postmodern circles. None of the following would be considered essential beliefs in the Evangelical Postmodern view of the gospel:

- Everlasting life.
- Justification by faith alone.
- Life after death.
- The Trinity.
- Inerrancy.
- Creation.
- Jesus' bodily resurrection.
- Substitutionary atonement.
- The virgin birth.

I'm not suggesting that all of those things are essential truths that must be believed. As those of you who know me know, I believe that *some* of those things are truths we must believe to be born again, though all of them must be true in order for us to be born. My view is that we must believe what John 6:47 says, that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting, irrevocable, life.

My point is that Evangelical Postmoderns do not have *any sine qua nons*. There is *nothing* that must be believed in order to be born again.

The issue for Evangelical Postmoderns is not some essential doctrine. There is no essential doctrine for them. The issue for them is a personal encounter with God which is gained by personal surrender to God.

If you don't realize this, you will find yourself misunderstanding what an Evangelical Postmodern is saying.

When an Evangelical Postmodern speaks of his *conversion*, he isn't saying anything about what he believes or even about his eternal destiny. He is talking about *an encounter he had with God that has given him peace of mind*.

When an Evangelical Postmodern speaks of when he became a Christian, you may wrongly interpret that to mean that he is referring to when he came to faith in Christ for eternal life.

If an Evangelical Postmodern were to speak of his *salvation*, you would most likely be wrong to think that he was talking about his secure eternal destiny, or even his *insecure* eternal destiny. He would most likely be talking about the peace of mind he has experienced as a result of his encounter with God.

I recommend you evangelize Evangelical Postmoderns. Don't assume they are merely confused believers. Ask them if they are sure that they will spend eternity in Jesus' kingdom. When they indicate that they aren't sure of that (or anything at all), show them that this is what Jesus promises to all who simply believe in Him.

When you evangelize an Evangelical Postmodern, you are essentially challenging their entire way of looking at the gospel, and indeed, of reality in general. You are calling for a radical paradigm shift.

VIII. EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNISM HAS MADE SOME INROADS INTO THE GRACE MOVEMENT

While very few in the Free Grace movement actually would call themselves Evangelical Postmoderns, some of the thinking of that movement has been embraced by some in the Free Grace movement.

A. MY EXPERIENCE TELLS ME WHAT THE GOSPEL IS

I've heard the following statement many times from many Free Grace people: "I know you need to believe A, B, and C (and you don't need to believe D, E, and F) to be born again *because of my own experience.*"

Free Grace people often point to their *experience* as the reason why they know what the saving message is. Yet our experience proves nothing. Our experience can be wrong.

We determine what the saving message is not by our experience, but by what God has told us in His Word, especially what He told us in the only evangelistic book in Scripture, John's Gospel.

Over the past few years there has been controversy in Free Grace circles over whether in order to be born again a person must believe that Jesus guarantees the believer *everlasting life*, irrevocable life, secure salvation.

I have noted with amazement that the arguments against everlasting life as a necessary truth for the new birth are *often experiential, not biblical*. Someone may argue along the following lines:

I know you don't need to believe in the irrevocability of everlasting life to be born again because I was born again before I believed that the life I had was irrevocable.

Or, someone might say:

I know you don't need to believe in eternal security to be born again because my cousin was a wonderful Christian and he died without ever having believed in eternal security.

The fact of the matter, however, is that one's experience may be wrong. The Bible is true. So if a person isn't born again until he believes that what he gets from Jesus is an irrevocable eternal destiny, then I should change my testimony to reflect the truth. I don't change the truth to conform to my testimony.

How do you know your cousin never believed that? And how do you know that your cousin was a wonderful Christian? A person may be a wonderful religious person who is not yet born again. Or they may be a terrible person who is born again. We know someone is born again by what they believe, not by what they do. Of all people, we in the Free Grace movement should not be basing how we know someone is saved on their works.

B. ALL BELIEFS ARE MIXED WITH DOUBTS

I've spoken with Free Grace people who say that belief and doubt can and do co-exist. Some have gone so far as to tell me that nothing we believe is something we are sure of, that everything we believe is something we also doubt.

Free Grace people who hold this are basing this belief not on Scripture, but on experience.

The Scriptures are clear that what we believe is what we are persuaded is true. Belief in the Bible is never something which we think may be true and may not be true.

Belief and doubts are mutually exclusive in Scripture.

I have written elsewhere about the little faith and great faith passages.¹⁵ Those passages do not teach degrees of faith in a given proposition. They teach that some propositions are harder to believe than others.

My point is that when a Free Grace person says that we can believe something and also doubt that same something, he is being Postmodern and he is actually denying the Free Grace position.

The Free Grace position depends on the certainty of our beliefs. Obviously assurance cannot be of the essence of saving faith if we cannot be certain of our eternal destiny until we die.

IX. CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EVANGELICAL POSTMODERNITY IS NOT THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

The good news that Jesus Christ preached is found in verses like John 3:16, John 5:24, and John 6:47.

Jesus promises everlasting life, life that can never be lost, to all who believe in Him.

While there is a present benefit to the believer, that benefit is not an ordered life, a cleaner planet, or more joy and peace. The present benefit is that the believer has God's irrevocable life and that life is one which is full of great potential.

The emphasis in what Jesus gives, however, is on the eternity of the life. It never ends. It goes beyond the grave.

Jesus promises a new glorified body to the believer (John 11:25). And He promises a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Revelation 21–22).

The gospel of Postmodernism isn't even vaguely close to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Postmoderns have abandoned propositional truth found in the Bible and with it they have abandoned the promise of everlasting life that Jesus makes for those who simply believe in Him.

In place of believing in Jesus for everlasting life is surrendering to God for an ordered, transformed life here and now. When man creates his own gospel, the resulting message is not good news at all. The gospel of Evangelical Postmodernism is bad news.

¹⁵ Bob Wilkin, "Should We Rethink the Idea of Degrees of Faith?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19:37 (Autumn 2006): 3-21.