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in omnibus glorificetur Deus
"in everything, may God be glorified"

CHAPTER 1

Star Trek and the Postmodern Generation

The camera focuses on a futuristic spacecraft against the background of distant galaxies. The narrator's voice proudly recites the guiding dictum: "Space — the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission — to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before."

With these words began each episode of the popular television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which completed its final season in May 1994.

In many ways *The Next Generation* was simply an updated version of the earlier *Star Trek* series, placed in a future era, after the resolution of some of the galactic political difficulties that plagued the universe of the previous space voyagers. Yet, sometime after Jean-Luc Picard's new breed of explorers took over the command of the redesigned *Enterprise* from Captain Kirk's crew, the creators of the series discovered that the world of their audience was in the midst of a subtle paradigm shift: modernity was giving birth to postmodernity. As a result, *The Next Generation* became a reflection — perhaps even a mold — of the worldview of the emerging generation.

The shifts evident in the transition from *Star Trek* to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* reflect a deeper transition occurring in Western society.

The Movement from Modernity to Postmodernity

Many social observers agree that the Western world is in the midst of change. In fact, we are apparently experiencing a cultural shift that rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity out of the decay of the Middle Ages: we are in the midst of a transition from the modern to the postmodern era.¹ Of course, transitional periods are exceedingly difficult to describe and assess. Nor is it fully evident what will characterize the emerging epoch.² Nevertheless, we see signs that monumental changes are engulfing all aspects of contemporary culture.

The term *postmodern* may first have been coined in the 1930s to refer to a major historical transition already under way³ and as the designation for certain developments in the arts.⁴ But postmodernism did not gain widespread attention until the 1970s. First it denoted a new style of architecture. Then it invaded academic circles, originally as a label for theories expounded in university English and philosophy departments. Eventually it surfaced as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon.

Whatever else it might be, as the name suggests, postmodernism signifies the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it involves a rejection of the modern mind-set, but launched under the conditions of modernity. Therefore, to understand postmodern thinking, we must view it in the context of the modern world that gave it birth and against which it is reacting.

The Modern Mind

Many historians place the birth of the modern era at the dawn of the Enlightenment, which followed the Thirty Years' War. The stage, however, was set earlier — in the Renaissance, which elevated humankind to the center of reality. Characteristic of the new outlook was Francis Bacon's vision of humans exercising power over nature by means of the discovery of nature's secrets.

Building on the Renaissance, the Enlightenment elevated the individual self to the center of the world.⁵ René Descartes laid the philosophical foundation for the modern edifice with his focus on doubt,

which led him to conclude that the existence of the thinking self is the first truth that doubt cannot deny — a principle formulated in his re-appropriation of Augustine's dictum *Cogito ergo sum*. Descartes thus defined human nature as a thinking substance and the human person as an autonomous rational subject. Isaac Newton later provided the scientific framework for modernity, picturing the physical world as a machine the laws and regularity of which could be discerned by the human mind. The modern human can appropriately be characterized as Descartes's autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world.

The Enlightenment Project. The postulates of the thinking self and the mechanistic universe opened the way for the explosion of knowledge under the banner of what Jürgen Habermas called the "Enlightenment project." It became the goal of the human intellectual quest to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modernity characteristic of the twentieth century, which has sought to bring rational management to life in order to improve human existence through technology.⁶

The project of modernity, formulated in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, consists of a relentless development of the objectivating sciences, the universalistic bases of morality and law, and autonomous art in accordance with their internal logic but at the same time a release of the cognitive potentials thus accumulated from their esoteric high forms and their utilisation in praxis; that is, in the rational organisation of living conditions and social relations. Proponents of the Enlightenment . . . still held the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would further not only the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness.

Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Unfinished Project,"
in *The Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 162-63.

At the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment project are certain epistemological assumptions. Specifically, the modern mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective, and good.⁷ Moreover, moderns assume that, in principle, knowledge is accessible to the human mind.

The demand for certain knowledge sets the modern inquirer in search of a method of demonstrating the essential correctness of philosophical, scientific, religious, moral, and political doctrines.⁸ The Enlightenment method places the many aspects of reality under the scrutiny of reason and assesses it on the basis of that criterion.⁹ That is to say that this method exercises an absolute faith in human rational capabilities.

The Enlightenment perspective assumes that knowledge is not only certain (and hence rational) but also objective. The assumption of objectivity leads the modernist to claim access to dispassionate knowledge. Modern knowers profess to be more than merely conditioned participants in the world they observe: they claim to be able to view the world as unconditioned observers — that is, to survey the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history.¹⁰

The pursuit of dispassionate knowledge divides the scientific project into separate disciplines¹¹ and gives special status to the specialist, the neutral observer who has gained expertise in a limited field of endeavor.

In addition to assuming that knowledge is certain and objective, Enlightenment thinkers also assume that it is inherently good. The modern scientist, for example, considers it axiomatic that the discovery of knowledge is always good. This assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge renders the Enlightenment outlook optimistic. It leads to the belief that progress is inevitable, that science, coupled with the power of education, will eventually free us from our vulnerability to nature, as well as from all social bondage.

Enlightenment optimism, together with the focus on reason, elevates on human freedom. Suspect are all beliefs that seem to curtail autonomy or to be based on some external authority rather than reason (and experience). The Enlightenment project understands freedom largely in individual terms. In fact, the modern ideal champions the autonomous self, the self-determining subject who exists outside any tradition or community.¹²

Modernity and Star Trek. Like modern fiction in general, the original *Star Trek* series reflected many aspects of the Enlightenment project and of late modernity. The crew of the *Enterprise* included persons of various nationalities working together for the common benefit of humankind. They were the epitome of the modern universalist anthropology. The message was obvious: we are all human, and we must overcome our differences and join forces in order to complete our mandate, the quest for certain, objective knowledge of the entire universe of which space looms as “the final frontier.”

One hero of the old *Star Trek* was Spock. Although he was the only crew member who came from another planet (he was part human, part Vulcan), in his nonhumanness he actually served as a transcendent human ideal. Spock was the ideal Enlightenment man, completely rational and without emotion (or at least able to hold his emotions in check). His dispassionate rationality repeatedly provided the key to solving problems encountered by the crew of the *Enterprise*. In such cases, the writers appear to have been arguing that in the end our problems can be solved by the application of rational expertise.

Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built.

The Postmodern Mind

Modernity has been under attack at least since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) lobbed the first volley against it late in the nineteenth century, but the full-scale frontal assault did not begin until the 1970s. The immediate intellectual impulse for the dismantling of the Enlightenment project came from the rise of deconstruction as a literary theory, which influenced a new movement in philosophy.

Philosophical Postmodernism. Deconstruction arose as an extension of a theory in literature called “structuralism.”

Structuralists argue that language is a social construct and that people develop literary documents — texts — in an attempt to provide structures of meaning that will help them make sense out of the meaninglessness of their experience. Structuralists maintain that literature provides categories that help us to organize and understand our experience.

rience of reality. They also contend that all societies and cultures possess a common, invariant structure.¹³

The deconstructionists (or poststructuralists) reject this last tenet of structuralism. Meaning is not inherent in a text itself, they argue, but emerges only as the interpreter enters into dialogue with the text.¹⁴ And because the meaning of a text is dependent on the perspective of the one who enters into dialogue with it, it has as many meanings as it has readers (or readings).

Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as a text will be read differently by each reader, they said, so reality will be "read" differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole.

On the basis of ideas such as these, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida calls for abandonment of both "onto-theology" (the attempt to set forth ontological descriptions of reality) and the "metaphysics of presence" (the idea that something transcendent is present in reality).¹⁵ Because nothing transcendent inheres in reality, he argues, all that emerges in the knowing process is the perspective of the self who interprets reality.

Michel Foucault adds a moral twist to Derrida's call. Foucault asserts that every interpretation of reality is an assertion of power. Because "knowledge" is always the result of the use of power,¹⁶ to name something is to exercise power and hence to do violence to what is named. Social institutions inevitably engage in violence when they impose their own understanding on the centerless flux of experience, he says. Thus, in contrast to Bacon, who sought knowledge in order to gain power over nature, Foucault claims that every assertion of knowledge is an act of power.

Richard Rorty, in turn, jettisons the classic conception of truth as either the mind or language mirroring nature. Truth is established neither by the correspondence of an assertion with objective reality nor by the internal coherence of the assertions themselves, says Rorty. He argues that we should simply give up the search for truth and be content with interpretation. He proposes replacing classic "systematic philosophy" with "edifying philosophy," which "aims at continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth."¹⁷

The work of Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty reflects what seems to have become the central dictum of postmodern philosophy: "All is difference." This view sweeps away the "uni" of the "universe" sought by the Enlightenment project. It abandons the quest for a unified grasp of objective reality. It asserts that the world has no center, only differing viewpoints and perspectives. In fact, even the concept of "world" presupposes an objective unity or a coherent whole that does not exist "out there." In the end, the postmodern world is merely an arena of "duelling texts."

The Postmodern Mood. Although philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty are influential on university campuses, they form only a part of a larger shift in thinking reflected in Western culture. What unifies the otherwise diverse strands of postmodernism is the questioning of the central assumptions of the Enlightenment epistemology.

In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. Gone is the belief that every day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world's great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They view life on earth as fragile and believe that the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude of cooperation rather than conquest.

The emphasis on holism among postmoderns is related to their rejection of the second Enlightenment assumption — namely, that truth is certain and hence purely rational. The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellect as the arbiter of truth. There are other valid paths to knowledge besides reason, say the postmoderns, including the emotions and the intuition.

Finally, the postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is "out there," waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.

In rejecting the modern assumption of the objectivity of knowledge, postmoderns also reject the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower. They contend that the work of scientists, like that of any other human beings, is historically and culturally conditioned and that our knowledge is always incomplete.

The postmodern worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate. Further, and far more radically, the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our *perceptions* of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate.

On the basis of this assumption, postmodern thinkers have given up the Enlightenment quest for any one universal, supracultural, timeless truth. They focus instead on what is held to be true within a specific community. They maintain that truth consists in the ground rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one participates. In keeping with this emphasis, postmodern society tends to be a communal society.

Postmodernism and The Next Generation. The postmodern perspective is reflected in the second *Star Trek* series, *The Next Generation*. The crew of the later *Enterprise* is more diverse than that of the original, including species from other parts of the universe. This change represents the broader universality of postmodernity: humankind is no

The post-industrial society . . . is also a "communal" society in which the social unit is the community rather than the individual, and one has to achieve a "social decision" as against, simply, the sum total of individual decisions which, when aggregated, end up as nightmares, on the mode of the individual automobile and collective traffic congestion.

Daniel Bell, "The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society," in *The Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 264.

longer the only advanced intelligence, for evolution has been operative throughout the cosmos. More importantly, the understanding of the quest for knowledge has changed. Humankind is not capable of completing the mandate alone; nor does the burden of the quest fall to humans alone. The crew of the *Enterprise* symbolizes the "new ecology" of humankind in partnership with the universe. Their mission is no longer to boldly go "where no *man* has gone before" but "where no *one* has gone before."

In *The Next Generation*, Spock is replaced by Data, an android. In a sense, Data is a more fully realized version of the rational thinker than Spock, capable of superhuman intellectual feats. Nevertheless, despite his seemingly perfect intellect, he is not the transcendent human ideal that Spock embodies, because he is a machine. Unlike Spock, he desires not only to understand what it means to be human but in fact to become human. He believes he is somehow incomplete because he lacks such things as a sense of humor, emotion, and the ability to dream (and, indeed, he feels that he has become more complete when he later discovers that his maker programmed a capacity to dream into his circuitry.)

Although Data often provides valuable assistance in dealing with problems, he is only one of several who contribute to finding solutions. In addition to the "master of rationality," the *Enterprise* crew includes persons skilled in the affective and intuitive dimensions of human life. Especially prominent is Counselor Troi, a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the hidden feelings of others.¹⁸

The new voyages of the *Enterprise* lead its variegated crew into a postmodern universe. In this new world, time is no longer simply linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted.

In contrast to the older series, which in typical modern fashion generally ignores questions of God and religious belief, the postmodern world of *The Next Generation* shows interest in the supernatural, embodied, for example, in the strange character "Q." Yet its picture of the divine is not simply that of traditional Christian theology. Although possessing the classical divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence, the godlike being "Q" is morally ambiguous, displaying both benevolence and a bent toward cynicism and self-gratification.

Postmodernity and Evangelical Christianity

As George Marsden correctly concludes, in some sense evangelicalism — with its focus on scientific thinking, the empirical approach, and common sense — is a child of early modernity.¹⁹ But our society is in the throes of a monumental transition, moving from modernity to postmodernity. The emerging generation has been nurtured in a context shaped less by commitment to the Enlightenment project embodied in *Star Trek* than by the postmodern vision of Rorty and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

The transition from the modern era to the postmodern era poses a grave challenge to the church in its mission to its own next generation. Confronted by this new context, we dare not fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a return to the early modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth, for we are called to minister not to the past but to the contemporary context, and our contemporary context is influenced by postmodern ideas.

Postmodernism poses certain dangers. Nevertheless, it would be ironic — indeed, it would be tragic — if evangelicals ended up as the last defenders of the now dying modernity. To reach people in the new postmodern context, we must set ourselves to the task of deciphering the implications of postmodernism for the gospel.

Imbued with the vision of God's program for the world, we must claim the new postmodern context for Christ by embodying the Christian faith in ways that the new generation can understand. In short, under the banner of the cross, we must "boldly go where no one has gone before."

CHAPTER 2

The Postmodern Ethos

Postmodernism was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 P.M.

When it was originally built, the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis was hailed as a landmark of modern architecture. More importantly, it stood as the epitome of modernity itself in its goal of employing technology to create a utopian society for the benefit of all. But its unimpressed inhabitants vandalized the buildings. Government planners put a lot of effort into attempts to renovate the project. But finally, having sacrificed millions of dollars to the project, the government planners gave up. On that fateful afternoon in mid-July 1972, the building was razed with dynamite. According to Charles Jencks, who has been hailed as the "single most influential proponent of architectural postmodernism,"¹ this event symbolizes the death of modernity and birth of postmodernity.²

Our society is in the throes of a cultural shift of immense proportions. Like the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, the edifice that housed thought and culture in the modern era is crumbling. As modernity dies around us, we appear to be entering a new epoch — postmodernity.

The postmodern phenomenon encompasses many dimensions of contemporary society. At the core of them all, however, is an intellectual mood or outlook, an "ism" — "postmodernism."

Scholars disagree among themselves as to what postmodernism involves, but they have reached a consensus on one point: this