

European Brain Snakes

In Which We Surmise that the Brain Is
Ireland and We Call for St. Patrick



Douglas Wilson

Douglas Wilson, *European Brain Snakes: Postmodernism as a Species*
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Preamble



And the Frankish magi and sayers of sooth approached the emperor, and said not to be afraid of this serpent of YHWH. For the word and rod of the wise man had become a great serpent before the emperor. “Lo,” they said, “do we not have brain snakes every bit as large as this one?” And they published their snakes in a refereed journal. But the serpent of the wise man came unto the brain snakes, and swallowed them up. And thus it was that the brain snakes became tummy snakes (Ex. 7:8-13).

These things are a parable, line on line, precept on precept.

CHAPTER 1

Seeping Postmodernism



For many reasons, none of them intellectually compelling, postmodern thinking proper, along with postmodern assumptions unacknowledged, are making great headway in the “post-conservative” evangelical world. One lesson that we can take from the postmodernist playbook in this regard is that fooling around with language is actually a disguised power grab. While denying their point (because they always privilege their own discourse), I do want to turn it on them. Their fundamental dishonesty in reasoning and refusal to deal with God as He has revealed Himself, can only signal the presence of that old adversary in the camp, which is, of course, *unbelief*. These are not mere differences of opinion, or denominational distinctives.

This lie (for that is what it is) cloaks itself in “epistemic humility” and postures for the cameras, all the while telling us that this demeanor of theirs is the foundation of *authentic* evangelism. In other words, living in community “with authenticity” is apparently to be built on the philosophical foundation of denying that there is any such a thing as authenticity.

This postmodern foolishness (that is seeping in among us and is now puddling around our shoes) should not be treated by us as an invitation to dialog. We are not being summoned to cordial discourse between various local faith communities, with the faith once delivered being treated as though it is nothing more than the grammar of our particular community. I am reminded of a comment that the great Southern Presbyterian theologian J.H. Thornwell made about his colleague from Kentucky, the great Robert Breckenridge. "What he does, he does with his might. Where he loves, he loves with his whole soul; when he hates, he hates with equal cordiality; and when he fights, he wants a clear field and nothing to do but fight." When it comes to this pomo stuff, it would take about two cents to get me into a Breckenridge mode.

A similar taunt of defiance was written by C.S. Lewis in his classic *That Hideous Strength*. Speaking of the "fabulously learned and saintly Richard Crowe" he notes that the last words of Crowe had been "Marry, Sirs, if Merlin who was the Devil's son was a true King's man as ever ate bread, is it not a shame that you, being but the sons of bitches, must be rebels and regicides?" Sons of bitches about pegs it.

I use these words deliberately, because it reveals how much postmodern thinking has penetrated the evangelical world. I am not here speaking of those writers who are openly cheering postmodernism and throwing their hats in the air. I am speaking of churches and individual Christians who flinch and wince at the free use of "sons of bitches" and who do not wince at all when someone says that "objective truth" may be a concept that will not

serve us well evangelistically in these postmodern times. “Jesus is Lord” is a truth, to be sure, but it is a truth in *our* linguistic community. And the compromised say that they may not agree with this, but surely we can conduct our discourse on a higher level?

At the end of the day, any theologian who defends the truth as an objective reality apart from our experience of it will be charged with epistemic arrogance and hubris. This charge will be made regardless of his personal demeanor, grace, or graciousness. This charge will be made because the use of language in this debate is all about who will “have the center.” The pomos want it, and they will lie to get it.

And so you see the real offense of the “serrated edge.” The serrated edge does not just indicate a willingness to stand for the truth that Jesus is Lord outside all “linguistic communities,” that He is the Lord of heaven and earth. It does show this, but it reveals much more. The use of the serrated edge shows that we *anticipate* the charge of hubris, arrogance, and all the rest of it, and we don’t care. It shows that we know we are in a fight—which cannot be said of many evangelicals who do not yet realize how fundamentally they have been compromised by the spirit of the age. Who gives greater offense to the evangelical by-stander on the sidelines? The one who says that authentic Christianity has to give up its claims to absolute truth to remain authentic? Or the one who said “sons of bitches”? Pietism is not just confused, it is impotent—and resents being told that.

This is why a favored tactic that is used to advance the postmodern agenda is an adroit use of “demands for an apology.” I have noticed that many Christians would

be suspicious if someone simply announced that the lines between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood, need to be blurred. Believing Christians hear something like this, and say, “Wait a minute . . .” Such blurring, therefore, is often advanced in a much more personal (and practical) way. The tactic is effective because believing Christians are often *personally* humble and, while they don’t mind defending the truth of the faith, they are much less comfortable about defending themselves. So the postmodern blurrers-of-lines go about it this way.

Here it is in a short form. They make an accusation, wait for the denial, and then offer to split the difference. Take an absurd form of this for purposes of illustration. A godly person is accused of shoplifting at ten area department stores. He denies it, indignantly. The accusers then suggest that he demonstrate his humility by “apologizing” for shoplifting at *one* of them. But of course, he didn’t do any shoplifting. If he refuses, he is upbraided for his pride and stubbornness. “Must think he is sinless.” If he agrees, for the sake of peace, he has agreed to a lie, and a blurring of the lines between truth and a lie. If he has agreed fundamentally, he has been taken out of the conflict between truth and lies. If he has (sinfully) compromised in it, but still seeks to remain in the battle, then the same drill will be run on him again.

In the realm of faith, apologies (i.e. seeking forgiveness) occur, and they occur all the time. But the truth of God’s Word should govern the entire process. If someone has sinned, that person should confess it. If he has not, he should not. Offering an apology simply as a means of making peace (detached from the truth)

is an offense against God. Offering an apology to get the adversaries to lay off is capitulation and surrender. The whole thing is a basic *tactic* of theirs, and like so many of their tactics (I wish this were the sixteenth century so that I could use the phrase *knavish tricks* here), the whole thing is knit together with lies.

This is why it is necessary to employ satire, lampooning, and so on, in our response to postmodernism. In Scripture, such tactics are to be employed against Christ-denying Pharisees, statisticians, apostates, and so on. This is simply another way of affirming what I have always affirmed about the point of lawful satire, which is that it is fundamentally to be aimed at religious arrogance. This is an argument I laid out in *The Serrated Edge*, but the difficulty comes (as always) in the *application*. Stuffed-shirt Pharisees almost never identify *themselves* in this way. “Pharisee” was a term of praise until Jesus got done with it. No one knocks on your door and says, “Hello, I am here as an agent of Hell, and I have come to lead you astray.”

In other words, if you ever knock a wolf (in sheep’s clothing) a good one, the chances are outstanding that said wolf will start bleating like you are some kind of maniac shepherd. So remember where we are. This is an attack on postmodernists within the evangelical camp, those who are now saying that there is *no such thing as absolute truth*, that there are no metanarratives, not even those revealed by God, and so on. We shouldn’t use this kind of language on Baptists for dunking, or Presbyterians for sprinkling, which would evidence a complete lack of proportion.

But postmodernism reeks like a sulfur pit, and if I ever stop throwing rocks at this hellish Apparition from

the Academy, it is only because my arm is tired. Post-modernism, in the forms I am attacking, *is* apostasy. That is the point.

Do we run the risk of confusing our own applications of scriptural principles with Scripture itself? That is of course a possible temptation. But it does not follow from this that no applications can be made with scriptural authority. We are *required* in Scripture to make such applications with scriptural authority. If we do not have the capacity to draw on Scripture as we teach Christians how to paint, compose, vote, dance, sing, write, and so on, then this would not be *Christian* cultural leadership at all. But if it *is* Christian cultural leadership, then there are applications we must be making from Scripture. We do not look at Christians who differ with us in order to say that “your guess is as good as mine.”

There must be a way of saying that the *reveling* that St. Paul prohibited in the New Testament corresponds to a 21st century *rave*. Without such applications, the Scriptures are sufficient for nothing other than being admired from afar. No situation that any of us have faced in the course of our lives is *exactly* parallel to the particular issues addressed in the Bible.

In short, it is an *applied* Bible that is sufficient. Put another way, the Bible alone is sufficient for *all applications*. The Bible does not step in for us and make the applications itself. And if the Bible is not applied by us to situations it never mentions by name, then how could it be sufficient? Sufficient for what? There are many answers to the question, but smacking postmodernism is one of them.

All Christians are called to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. But before we charge off to

do this, we need to distinguish between catholicity and mush. A catholic or ecumenical spirit is not an optional add-on extra. But there is a vast difference between Christians who love each other in Christ, despite various doctrinal differences (known and acknowledged), and a “lower common denominator” unity which has been a modern evangelical specialty for a generation or so. This problem has grown considerably as the “denominator” has gradually broadened, and now takes in all sorts of “communities of faith.” And this has been heightened in the last few years as postmodernist evangelicals (an oxymoron, by the way) have taken this dictum, called, and raised it ten. In *A New Kind of Christian*, Brian McLaren now addresses the problems of ecumenicity across different *faiths*, and not just different denominations of trinitarian Christians. He deals with this issue by saying that it is none of our business who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. Besides being an obvious dodge, it invites the next obvious question—is it any of our business if there *is* a Heaven or Hell?

J. Gresham Machen was right in his classic book *Christianity and Liberalism*. Liberalism was not a variant of the Christian faith, it was another faith altogether. The liberalism of Machen’s day constituted nothing more or less than simple unbelief. The same thing is true of postmodernism in our day. It is nothing but unbelief, and unbelief and orthodoxy mix about as well as kerosene and sherry. This may be dismissed by some as “irascibility,” but there it is. Someone will ask if I am willing to drop the H-bomb—is postmodernism heresy? *Of course it is*. It is another religion, and other religions decked out in Christian garb is what genuine heresy actually is.

And this is one of the central problems that I have had with the sectarians of the Reformed world—those “Truly-Reformed” (TRs) who glibly use the epithet *heresy* to describe *denominational* differences. Having been on the receiving end of that treatment, I am loathe to do unto others what has been done unto me. It is unbiblical for one thing, and stupid for another. And one of the reasons it is stupid is that the Christian faith is facing a momentous challenge in postmodernism, which is another worldview and faith altogether. And *this* is the moment that some have chosen to declare war on fellow Christians for bringing children under the age of eight to the Lord’s Table. They are not fighting heresy—they are actually *refusing* to. In the meantime, postmodern mush masquerading as catholicity is rampant in the