

God's Plan: A Truth That Has Fallen on Hard Times

By Pastor Douglas Shearer

That God has a plan is a notion that has fallen on hard times. A plan embraced by faith, and implying design, purpose, and comprising a set of mutually consistent propositions put off limits to challenge and criticism. That very possibility is under attack - not from just one antagonist, but two.

The first antagonist is, of course, the rationalism that arose during the Renaissance and which the Enlightenment philosophes further crystallized and hardened. What stands behind "rationalism" is "doubt" - meaning an unwillingness to allow any proposition to be clothed in the guise of "absolute truth." The epistemological underpinnings of that doubt were spelled out early on by both David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

Karl Popper

More recently, it has been summed up in Karl Popper's renowned treatise *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, published in 1934. Science, Popper claimed, is, by its very nature, "irreducibly conjectural" - meaning whatever knowledge science produces can never be pressed beyond the "merely possible." In short, science can only spin out theory - and each step forward in the acquisition of "scientific knowledge" is predicated on "falsifying" existing theory. Doubt, then, is the engine driving science - which is the form "rationalism" has assumed here in the West.



Karl Popper

Thomas Kuhn

Thomas Kuhn, building on Popper's thesis, has suggested that science undergoes periodic crises - during which one theory is replaced by another that provides a simpler yet more complete explanation of the data under investigation. The crisis is followed by a prolonged quiescence - during which the new theory is leafed out, meaning its claims are clarified and its implications are fully developed. That, in turn, is followed by another period of growing doubt - prompted by discoveries which can't be satisfactorily subsumed under the existing theory - and a new crisis is spawned, leading to the fabrication of a still more encompassing theory that is often radically different from the one it replaces; and so on and so forth; e.g., Ptolemaic cosmology is replaced by Copernican cosmology; Newtonian physics is replaced by quantum mechanics, creation is replaced by Dar-

winian evolution, etc. Kuhn spelled out his insights in a book he entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962. Like Popper, Kuhn made it clear that doubt is the engine driving the acquisition of rational - meaning empirically based - knowledge.

So pervasive has science become in the West, especially here in America, that the doubt driving it has become a cultural mind-set, making it very difficult for most Americans to hold onto “absolutist beliefs” - beliefs put off limits to criticism and challenge. We’ve been taught that it’s “unreasonable” to accord any belief that kind of privileged status. Creation, the flood, the virgin birth, the Resurrection, the infallibility of scripture, heaven and hell, the inherent sinfulness of mankind, an after-life - it’s all subject to criticism and challenge, and to suggest otherwise is “irrational” - indeed, its very definition.



Thomas Kuhn

That’s a tough accusation to bear up under; consequently, most evangelicals have begun to shy away from doctrinal pronouncements of any kind. Doctrine is becoming less and less important among evangelicals - not because they’re lazy and undisciplined, but because they don’t want to be labeled “hayseed fundamentalists” - *they don’t want to swim against the prevailing cultural tide that makes criticism and doubt the mark of intellectual respectability*. Any kind of doctrine that suggests a hard and fast definition of salvation or lays out an all-encompassing grand design guiding human history is becoming ever more distasteful. *So much for God’s Plan.*

Postmodernism

The second antagonist is what currently passes under the general rubric of “postmodernism.” To some extent, postmodernism is both an outgrowth of and reaction against science. It builds upon many of the themes existentialists highlighted during the first half of the 20th Century.

Science is, by its very nature, geared toward the discovery of “universals” - and its effectiveness can be measured by how well it strips away the “abnormalities” and “peculiarities” that get in the way of identifying those universals. That’s fine for science; but if that mind-set is carried over into every-day life, it can be pernicious. Why? Because it’s those very “peculiarities” or “abnormalities” or “differences” that give rise to a sense of self. Personal identity, for example, is rooted not in what we share in common with all other men, the universals that define what it means to be human, but in what distinguishes us from all other men. It’s the focus on differences and peculiarities that lies at the heart of postmodernism

- just as it did for existentialism some thirty years earlier. Postmodernists repudiate universals - and cleave instead to heterogeneity - the belief that no one "truth" is valid.

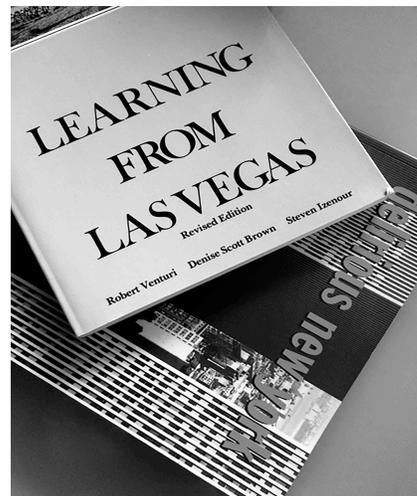
Postmodernism as an art-form first surfaced in architecture - and was a reaction against the "International Style," fostered by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius in Europe and Louis Sullivan in the United States. Charles Eames carried it over into the design of furniture. Its mantra was "*form follows function*" - meaning the essence of good design consists of eliminating whatever features don't serve the intended purpose of the building. Ornament for its own sake was deemed "a crime." In short, *less is beautiful*.

Inevitably, the International Style produced buildings that reflected a stultifying sameness. There was nothing that really distinguished one from the other. There was "no personality." The towering, glass enclosed office buildings that rise over Los Angeles and Houston, the featureless housing projects that blight Chicago - all of it reflects the deadening impact of the International Style. Nothing but dull monotony.

In 1972, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published a ground breaking book entitled *Learning from Las Vegas*. Its basic premise was "*less is a bore*." Yes, they conceded, the buildings along the Las Vegas strip are garish and ostentatious - and adorned with superfluous decoration serving no functional purpose; but for all that, they boast full-blooded personalities that proponents of the International Style have never produced and can never hope to produce.

Postmodernists assert that the quest for unifying principles and all-encompassing grand designs drains not only architecture but life itself of its meaning - of what Suzi Gablik calls its "enchantment."

Jean-François Lyotard, a seminal postmodernist, takes it further - insisting that life is, by its very nature, chaotic - filled with complexities and nuances most of which lie hidden in the backwaters of the subconscious - if even there. It's impossible, he claims, to reduce life to a single all encompassing story - what he calls a "metanarrative" - with a clearly defined plot featuring a beginning, a middle, and an ending. Any and all such attempts are futile - and not just futile, but inherently dishonest. Why? Because, in the end, a metanarrative reflects nothing more than the biases of the persons who fabricate it or the cultures that give



Learning from Las Vegas
Venturi, Brown, and Izenour

rise to it. Unquestionably, Lyotard is following up on the “stream of consciousness” insights that James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, etc. wove into their novels at the turn of the last century.

There is no grand design, only a hodge-podge of “highly localized” paradigms that often defy description, that are constantly undergoing change, and that frequently bump into each other. The key, then, is to embrace difference - even to celebrate difference; but, above all, to keep it from erupting into conflict and mayhem. Ultimately, so claim postmodernists, it was the clash of cultural metanarratives that led to World Wars I and II - a clash of ideologies arising from a refusal to embrace different notions of the truth. And that, postmodernists insist, has got to be stopped.

“Truth” is relative only to the culture that has given rise to it - and should never be foisted on cultures built around competing “truths.” Cultural sensitivity is, therefore, another of postmodernism’s linchpins - and its violation is considered not just misguided, but profoundly immoral. The Christian Faith is certainly to be respected, but no more so than Buddhism or Islam. Its claims are not absolute and its spread to foreign cultures is wrongheaded, dangerous, and even unethical.

Postmodernism, like existentialism before it, emphasizes commitment. But the commitment existentialism promoted was markedly different. Existential commitment was a lonely quest undertaken by solitary “heroes;” moreover, it was never devoid of content. Existentialists went out of their way to delineate the nature of their commitment - its purpose - its intent: e.g., Sartre - Marxism; Kierkegaard - Christianity; Ezra Pound - Facism; etc. The commitment pursued by postmodernists, on the other hand, is much more communal in nature - and is largely bereft of content - assuming more the form of a life-style than a body of propositional truths. It’s precisely this feature that characterizes so many of the “emerging churches” - and explains why they stress ambiance and mood and play down teaching and preaching.

That God has a plan for all mankind - a plan that’s woven into the fabric of history and reflects transcendent truth - it’s a notion that has indeed fallen on hard times! And its neglect and often its blatant repudiation has taken root in many evangelical churches - again, most especially among many of the so-called “emerging churches.”
