

Publishing in a Postmodern World



*Remember
your reader's
assumptions and
values.*

by David Mehlis

In today's postmodern world, people no longer come to church because they have an awareness of sin and are searching for salvation. Rather, they come seeking spiritual inspiration or a new attitude with which to face the challenges of daily life. Their faith is centered on their religious experiences rather than on biblical truth. In the end, postmoderns believe that there are no external sources of truth, no absolutes. They hold that all truth is subjective. Therefore, what one person believes is true, such as the Bible, is not necessarily true for someone else.

Postmodernism has implications for churches. If faith is centered on experiences, then pastors who want to reach postmoderns will offer opportunities for people to participate in the learning process. They will emphasize inductive study and group discussions more than deductive or declarative instruction and exposition of Bible truths. In today's relativistic society, it is no longer sufficient for a pastor or a Sunday school teacher to require students to memorize Scripture. Since the Bible is only viewed as directionally authoritative, now teachers must link the absolute truths of Scripture to the students' subjective experiences, describing how Bible verses can benefit them and inviting them to personally experience this.

Implications for publishers

Postmodernism likewise affects how potential readers view Christian books and other religious products. A postmodern reader is likely to say, "If your books are not speaking to me, why should I buy them? Unless a book can tell me how a biblical truth impacts me today, now, I do not need it. It is not relevant."

In the past, most Christian titles centered on who God is, on Bible doctrine. They assumed readers' primary need was for information and understanding about a particular subject. However, knowledge and information-based products are appealing to fewer and fewer Christians, and even less to non-Christians. Evangelical products

can no longer merely present facts. To successfully reach believers and non-believers alike, our books must take readers' postmodern assumptions and values into account. This means they must present absolute truths in a context that facilitates subjective appropriation of such truths. They must engage the heart, as well as the mind. Books that include examples from real life, more biographies, more *stories*, communicate more effectively with today's readers. But then, Jesus always spoke to both the hearts and minds of people—never one to the exclusion of the other.

Value of stories

Stories are an attractive format for ideas. Consider this example: dispensationalism was very important to some elements of the American church 30 years ago. What has brought about the resurgence of the dispensationalist thinking of the end times? The *Left Behind* series from Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye. The dramatic settings and the identification that readers have with the characters in the *Left Behind* series makes these books an effective tool to communicate those specific ideas, with a specific theology.

The value of stories is not limited to fiction. Another best-seller with unprecedented success in the market is Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez*. What has made this book so effective? In part, it is the stories and anecdotes it includes. It enables readers to personalize the message.

Do our products communicate with today's postmodern readers, in a way that they can understand? Will the titles we produce accomplish this purpose?

Make full use of the tools at your disposal to impact readers. Follow Jesus' example. He preached sermons. The sermon on the mount is filled with declarations, information, commandments: non-fiction. Yet, Jesus also used stories to communicate with his listeners. The story of the prodigal son is a poignant reminder of the power that stories can have to change lives and hearts.v

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