Jumping Off the Postmodern Bandwagon

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The postmodern bandwagon is racing into the future. And so, Timothy Cargal explains, if we do not want to be rendered "irrelevant" and left behind, we had better jump on.¹ In the following essay, I would like to explain why I disagree with Cargal's triumphalistic assessment of postmodernism, especially as it pertains to biblical hermeneutics, and why my counsel concerning this bandwagon is, if already on, to "jump off."

Although I was given the invitation to respond to any, or to all, of the four articles on Pentecostal hermeneutics published in the Fall 1993 issue of the journal, I have chosen to respond to Cargal's article because it was lucid, insightful, and ultimately disturbing. After a barrage of Ricoeurian rhetoric it was refreshing to read an article not laden with jargon. Cargal's skills are evident and I commend him for communicating his postmodern vision of the future in such a clear and compelling way. I must also admit that I do not find it particularly flattering or illuminating to be called a "text," so the articles steeped in this dimension of Ricoeurian analysis held little interest for me. Cargal, by way of contrast, spoke directly to the issue of biblical hermeneutics.

Building upon three characteristics of Pentecostal hermeneutics as described by French Arrington (an emphasis on pneumatic illumination, the dialogical role of experience, and biblical narratives),² Cargal seeks to show affinities between the hermeneutic of traditional Pentecostalism and that of postmodernism. In Cargal's view, all that is needed for Pentecostals to enter into the postmodern age is for them to throw off their Fundamentalist and Evangelical shackles. More specifically, Cargal challenges Pentecostals to reject their concern to root meaning in history in favor of the more dynamic and reader-oriented postmodern approach. Pentecostals are called to recognize the subjectivity inherent in all interpretation and use this insight to their advantage, to revel in the multiple meanings of the text which the Spirit may illuminate. Indeed, this path is not only open to Pentecostal scholarship, it is a path which Pentecostals must take if they expect to communicate to the postmodern world.

What shall we make of Cargal's brave new world? I shall answer this question with reference to Cargal's perception of the past, present, and future.

The Past and the Quest for Meaning

Cargal's article represents a critique of Evangelical approaches to Scripture and a call to embrace the postmodern interpretative paradigm. Specifically, Cargal chides Pentecostal scholars for working "within a philosophical paradigm dominated by historical concerns." He calls for Pentecostals to follow postmodernism in its rejection of the notion that "only what is historically and objectively true is meaningful." Cargal's call directly impinges upon two significant Evangelical concerns.

First, Evangelicals have generally insisted that ascertaining the historical meaning of a text is the central goal of hermeneutics. This concern for historical meaning is evident in the excellent textbook on hermeneutics recently penned by three faculty members of Denver Seminary. The authors define textual meaning as "that which the words and grammatical structures of that text disclose about the probable intention of its author/editor and the probable understanding of that text by its intended readers." Here, reconstructing the past is a crucial dimension of the quest for meaning.

Postmodernists are quick to criticize this historical focus. Attempted reconstructions of the past are deemed illusionary and ultimately irrelevant because they are never objective, always colored by the interpreter's pre-understanding. Intellectual honesty demands that we move away from this epistemologically flawed emphasis on the past. Cargal notes that in practice Pentecostals have never been overly concerned about historical meaning. Thus the move to postmodernism should not be too difficult.

My own fear is that Cargal's analysis of Pentecostalism and its potential for being significantly influenced by the postmodern paradigm is correct. Certainly postmodernism has much to contribute to those who will listen. As a result of recent trends, Evangelicals are more aware of their lack of objectivity, the nature of their pre-understanding, and the need to listen to those with whom they might disagree. Yet the ahistorical stance and epistemological skepticism of postmodernism is extreme and inevitably leads to relativism. While it is evident that we cannot achieve certainty concerning authorial intent of historical texts, we can gain knowledge. The hermeneutical circle is not entirely vicious; it is in reality a spiral. And it is the concern for historical meaning that

1 Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," 164.
2 Cargal, "Beyond the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy," 171.
4 See G. R. Osborne, The Hermeneutical Spiral (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity