

Ministry in a Postmodern Age -1

November 2007

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Many Christians have tried – some are still trying – to deny the presence of postmodernity, to retain the modern world that we felt so comfortable in, to which we preached a modernist gospel. Many want to turn the clock back, culturally and theologically. It cannot be done. NT Wright

*“Where the Christian community is incapable of producing lives such as those of the saints, the premises from which it argues will appear rootless and arbitrary”
Alasdair MacIntyre*

“God’s truth is credible to the world only when it sees a community shaped by the truth...if the gospel is to be heard, it must also be seen” Stanley Hauerwas

I. Understanding the cultural shifts... (see Post Modern Primer)

A. Characteristics of Modernity: (enlightenment)

- 1) conquest and control – progress
- 2) the age of the machine – productivity
- 3) the age of analysis – ‘a problem to be solved’
- 4) the age of secular science – verifiability
- 5) the age of absolute objectivity – certainty
- 6) a critical age – dogmatism
- 7) the age of the modern nation state and organization – capitalism & democracy
- 8) the age of individualism
- 9) the age of Protestantism and institutional religion – colonialism and culture wars
- 10) the age of consumerism –

The gospel in modernity:

- 1) a transaction (bridge/Roman road/ 4 laws)
- 2) a focus on reconciliation
- 3) a focus on right beliefs
- 4) a focus on right techniques (quiet time etc.)

B. Cracks in the Modern Wall

1) Progress used for evil purposes

Atomic energy leads to the bomb

Travel and military/industrial supremacy leads to cultural imperialism and slavery

The same science that solves the problem of diseases makes possible biological warfare.

Technology has led to busyness, isolation, and fragmentation of families.

Result – a questioning of the inherent supremacy of the modern ways.

2) The myth of modernism's 'universal value'

Modernity has brought marvelous fruits – lower infant mortality – higher standards of living – longer life – greater access to a larger world, affording opportunities for travel, and missions work, and the effects of the gospel being spread to the far corners. This is all good!

At the same time, we would confess to blindnesses – such as cultural imperialism in missions – and the continuity of slavery. And while these things aren't rooted in modernity, they are perceived as blind spots in the modern paradigm because modernity, for all its good, failed to address these things.

Do developing nations or pre-moderns *want* everything modernity has to offer?

Industrialization's demise of the family – quote from *Why the Rest Hates the West* (IVP) – p46,47

The enthronement of the individual over the community – same book – p62

The post-modern sees these problems and calls for the humility to acknowledge them... We are 20% of the world consuming 60% of the world's resources. Is this really the way we want to rest of the world to live? If so, what are the consequences? If not, why are we living this way?

3) Uncertainties regarding 'knowing'

- a) doubts in philosophy and linguistics
- b) doubts in history
- c) doubts in literature

C. Assumptions of Post-Modernity

1) a change in priorities: experience trumps ideas (NB: this is more critical than a change in the perception of truth) – 'what can one *really* know?' Answer: experience

What this means for the gospel? – Christian young adults are equally skeptical because they've received myriads of contradictory teachings (if they've been at all ecumenical in their learning experience) 1) our practice had better reinforce our beliefs –2) our truth claims need to be held with humility 3) we need to make room for faith (the world is opening to faith at the moment the church is stressing our capacity to prove)

2) a belief that context is a large determinant of one's perception of truth – What this means for the gospel? 1) It doesn't mean that I don't believe in the existence of

truth – rather, it means that I doubt your capacity to know it perfectly and declare it perfectly, so that I can receive it perfectly. I can get an image – but I can't get absolute truth!!! (I Cor. 13 - 2) It means that we need to be fairer in our assessment of others – avoiding secondary sources that attack other world views. 3) we need to learn to listen as learners BEFORE we become debaters. (Acts 17)

3) **a skepticism about the absolute claims of organizations** – Such claims are often viewed as salesmanship rather than truth claims. *What this means for the gospel:* We need to be careful to make room for the possibility that God is bigger than evangelicalism. To illustrate this, consider two missionaries working in Russia. One is working through and with the Orthodox church, believing that Christ is there and that they have much to teach us. The other is preemptively dismissive of Russian Orthodox Christianity, presuming that those who are within it aren't really saved, and don't understand the true gospel. **The two of them could never work together** without a major paradigm shift on both of their parts. *APPLICATION:* God's truth is to be found in many places: Nouwen – Merton – St. Patrick – Augustin – Eastern Orthodox... Phil. 1 – 'what then? Only that Christ is preached!

4) **because of the priority of experience, post moderns exhibit a longing for community** – because relationship is the one thing a person can know. *What this means for the gospel?* Our calling to BE the body of Christ needs to have a huge emphasis.

D. What we can learn from other transition periods...

- a. Deut. 7:1-2 for Israel – Luke 6:27
- b. Matthew 5:21,22; 27,28; 31,32; 33-35; 38-41
- c. Unclean meat in the OT vs. Acts 10 in the NT –
- d. How did people raised in Judaism react to these transitions? (see NT Wright Quote) Why?
- e. Discussion on the state of the church – modern or post-modern, or both?

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A Doctrinal Case study: New Paradigm of Salvation

This can be used as a meaningful discussion starter for camping staff as you work towards a common vision of sharing Christ's life with campers.

The premise of postmodern Christians is that the gospel has been reduced to a cheap transaction.

Problem: this is pure caricature – painting with broad, unfair strokes

Reality: this is a common perception, and we can and must learn from it

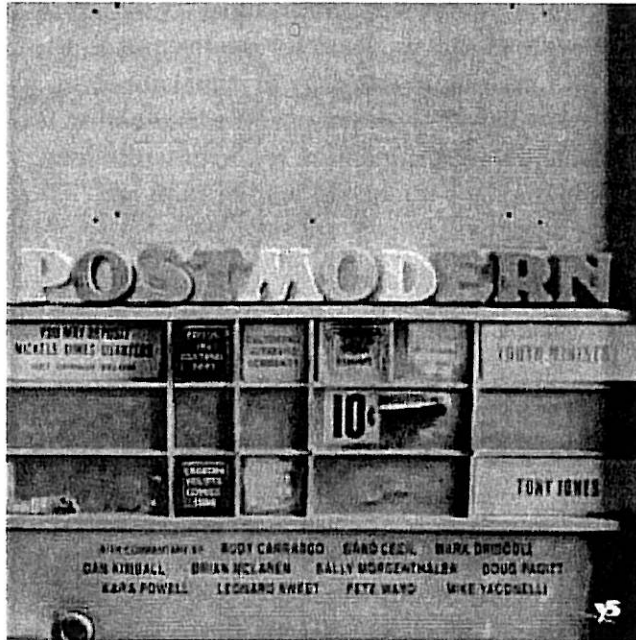
The tenses of salvation: *past* (Eph. 2:8) - *future* (Rom 8; I Cor 15) – *present* (I Pet. 1)

Salvation: Standard Evangelical	Salvation Re-formed
Individual/personal	Communitarian/global
Salvation 'from' hell	Salvation = invitation to step into God's redeeming activity
Exclusive – focus on 'in' or 'out'	Salvation – don't focus on who's in and out, but invite all to continual salvation
Breeds Passivity – get 'in' becomes the goal (redemption centered)	Breeds action – joining God's mission
Seems to be a point in time	Seems to be continual
Is focused on Jesus' name: Romans 10:9	Is rooted in the depth of propitiation I John 2:2
Tends to focus on spiritual renewal	Tends to focus on good works

1. These seem to be presented as polarities – either/or options. Are they?
2. Which option prevails in your understanding?
3. What are the benefits and dangers of the respective options?
4. What is the value of focusing on salvation as a transaction? What are the liabilities of such an approach?
5. A case study: Buddhist becomes Christian –
 - a) was it good that the travelers challenged the family's 'way' of believing?
 - b) Would the young man in the cave be 'saved' had he died before the missionaries arrived? How about if he died before the vision? Should we even be asking the question? Why or why not?
6. Of the following, which are most important in 'assuring your salvation?'
 - a) naming Jesus' name as your source of forgiveness and hope?
 - b) Setting aside known sin
 - c) Being willing to acknowledge that previously unknown sin IS sin

Deeds + Relationships + Images + Humility = postmodern

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Postmodernism didn't just happen overnight. It began in the middle of the 20th century in architecture, and then evolved into other sciences, literature, and eventually theology. Here's a link ([http://www.the-next-wave.org/stories/storyReader\\$607](http://www.the-next-wave.org/stories/storyReader$607)) that will help you get a more detailed overview of the movement as it applies to theology and the church. But a humble summary seems appropriate at this point.

The collapse of objective certainty, particularly with respect to science, has changed what we value. In an age when we thought that certainty could be achieved through scientific method, we were intrigued by study, evidence, words, theories, thesis statements and their support, anti-thesis etc. etc. Theologically, this kind of world loved charts, systems, propositional truths, proofs, and 'evidence that demands a verdict'.

Recent generations however, have generally (thought not completely) become disillusioned by all this. They've watched people declare words, and live consistently in contradiction to them. They've listened to pastors and theologians pompously declare when the world would end, and then sat and watched the sun rise and set on the predicted day of doom. They've seen the Christian West use 'God Words' to justify slavery, holocausts, corporate greed, and degradation of the environment. They've listened to couples use God Words to promise faithfulness in their marriages, only to see those words evaporate as meaningless too.

A generation is coming into its own who are, understandably, weary of God Words, even suspicious of them. So when we use lots of words to motivate there are often questions in the minds and hearts of the hearers: 1) *Does this person believe their own words?* 2) *Are*

they living by them? 3) Is there any way I can know, really know, whether or not they're true? And easy answers are, in the mind of the postmodern, hard to come by.

So if Words and Ideas can't be '*known*' substantially. What *can* be known? The answer in this age is simple: **experience**. You can't prove (in the sense of absolute knowing) to me that Jesus rose from the dead. But you *can* prove that you care for me by spending time with me, listening to me, and entering into my life, making my joys and concerns your own. You can prove to me that you love the world, by loving people, and caring for the environment, and working for justice, and showing compassion to the downtrodden. And if you do these things in Jesus name, then maybe I'll take the leap of faith and believe in Jesus.

That's postmodernity in a nutshell. The more you try to prove it with words, the less I'll listen. The more you simply share your life, generously and honestly, the more likely I'll be to believe. It almost seems that, once we stop caring about producing fruit, and start caring about loving unconditionally, fruit will come. But fruit is the promise; NEVER, in a sense the goal. In the old movie, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" St. Francis is confronted by Bernardo at one critical moment. Francis is rebuilding a small chapel – brick by brick. He's not doing much preaching. He's just stacking bricks and caring for poor people. Bernardo says, "I can help you!" to which Francis replies: "Words Bernardo. Words. There was a time when I believed in words." And then he turns back to his work – brick by brick. The work isn't contrived. It has no agenda other than love. And the words, when he uses them, carry the weight of credibility because they're backed by life.

This must be our way too, if the gospel, the real good news is to take root in our city. People have had their fill of words. What will we, together, do in His name to be the hands and feet of Jesus?

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