

Pacifism and Pugilism

Fight it, or forget it, it makes no difference. Postmodernism is here to stay [...sort of].

There is so much talk in church circles about issues pertaining to postmodernism. What is it? Where did it come from? How is it transmitted? These kinds of questions abound, sometimes sounding angry, sometimes hopeful, and sometimes fearful. Now, I am by no means an expert but I am concerned about the state of the church as it exists in North America today and feel like this topic hits a nerve. So, humbly, allow me to try and smudge some of the rain off our collective lens about this hot, wet topic.

What is postmodernism?

Postmodernism is a worldview. It is not a demographic – people are not postmoderns – but a psychographic [i.e. someone who tends to see the world in a postmodern light]. A worldview is a term used to describe the default way of understanding people have as a result of their cultural, social, and family backgrounds. For example, a French Resistance fighter in WWII will have a different view of the World than a Balinese dancer in modern day Asia. Some people make the mistake of confusing a worldview with a generation gap. A generation gap is expressed through a change of literature, fashion, musical taste, slang and other external behaviors and preferences. A shift in worldview, on the other hand, represents a different way of learning, determining value, different beliefs about the supernatural and spiritual realities, and an altogether alien operating system regarding truth, meaning, and beauty.

The postmodern world is a reaction against the world of the Enlightenment and Modernism, hence *post*-modernism. This reaction was first identified in art, literature and architecture but has since maneuvered into almost every area of North American society and lifestyle. Postmodernism is characterized by deconstructionism, a method of critical thinking that takes nothing at face value and questions all assumptions. This is commonly misdiagnosed as a rejection of absolute truth; truthfully, the postmodern mind doesn't reject truth so much as it rejects blind certainty – the kind of cataracts that allow well-meaning people to wage horrible wars, persecute minorities, or misuse scripture to fund anti-biblical moral cavalcades.

Now, to be fair, we must acknowledge the probability that postmodernism is an in-between step, between the default mode of thinking in the Enlightenment and something else. Perhaps that 'something else' has already emerged, but perhaps it has not. Perhaps postmodernism is that something else, but has yet to be renamed. I for one, cannot conceive of a reaction against something being perpetuated in such a way as to be sustainable. Ultimately the values of a culture and a people must be defined in terms of what we are for, not what we are against.

What does postmodernism have to do with the church?

Like it or not, the church is faced with a major change in the opinions and outlook of the emerging culture. The world we know today is vastly different than the one twenty years ago. My son, who is now one year old, will never know a world without cloning, high-speed internet, eco terrorism, or same sex marriage. He will never understand why he should research in a library instead of online, nor will he ever understand the way his father did church. His world is fundamentally different than mine, and the changes are only becoming more extreme. His world is a world of mystery not certainty, of increasing wonder not diminishing unknowing. His world is the world of Postmodernism. And it is here to stay...for now.

For some it is a holocaust, for others –a renaissance, but for us all it is a reality that cannot merely be combated or tolerated, but must be engaged. We must engage the emerging culture in North America in the same way our missionaries have grafted themselves into cultures all over the world. North America no longer belongs to us. Leonard Sweet, noted author and futurist, tells us that anyone born after 1962 is an immigrant to this new world, and as immigrants we must assimilate ourselves into this land.

Why?

Because. We must bring the gospel to the natives. We can no longer pretend that postmodernism is a fad. Neither can we imagine that if we fight hard enough against it, it will be defeated. Postmodernism is a worldview, a perspective indigenous to those in North America who were formerly labeled Generation X and to all those who have come since. It is neither inherently “good” nor “bad”, though it does possess elements of redemptive value [such as spiritual hunger] and rebellious vice [such as distrust, and pluralism] in much the same way as the Enlightenment and Modernist eras had their own elements of virtue and vice. Despite our personal views on whether or not we *like* the idea of a postmodern world, it has descended upon us and is sure to remain for one generation at least. With that in mind, perhaps we can focus our discussions about postmodernism and the emerging church on those things of redemptive worth and how best to reach people in this new paradigm with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which has been translated to so many other cultures before now.

What is the ministry “mindset”, some of the opportunities/values of postmodernism?

Okay, now that the groundwork has been laid, and we’ve all hopefully put down our pitchforks and burning torches, let us try and define – specifically – what the “p” word is all about. What characterizes the postmodern world, and where do the opportunities for spiritual conversation lie [notice I used the word ‘conversation’, not ‘conversion.’] First and foremost, I believe the postmodern world is a world of process, not processed food. It is a crock pot, where our evangelistic meal must be prepared patiently not ingested at a speed equal to the RPMs of our fragmented, fast-paced lives.

Dave Tomlinson, author of [The Post-Evangelical](#) succinctly defines it this way.

“[The postmodern world] is... a world in which dignity is granted to emotions and intuition, and where people are accustomed to communicating through words linked to images and symbols rather than merely through plain words or simple statements. It is a world in which people have come to feel a close affinity with the environment, and where there is a strong sense of global unity. The postmodern world is one in which people are deeply suspicious of institutions, bureaucracies, and hierarchies. And perhaps most important of all, it’s a world in which the spiritual dimension is once again talked about with eagerness and ease.”

- Dave Tomlinson, The Post-Evangelical [EmergentYS Books, 2003. Revised North American Edition]

As a jumping off point, I believe there are two main societal concerns for which the church holds the answer: consumerism and fragmentation. North Americans are among the most affluent people in the world, and also the loneliest. Daily we try and purchase goods and services to fill the god-shaped vacuum in our hearts. It is to no avail! Meaning is found in the intoxicating romance with Jesus Christ available to all who come to Him. He makes every mundane task, situation, and personality electric. Yet, the church has often catered to this consumerism instead of challenging it. We have to stop pressuring people to buy trinkets and instead encourage them to purchase relationships.

Likewise, I believe people are sick to death of leading fragmented lives full of driving their kids back and forth to soccer practices and PTA meetings, taking trips to the video store or the grocery store or the library. But our response – again – has been a contribution to this business rather than a solution to it. We are constantly asking people to make more trips to church [seven nights a week can be full of activity if you just love Jesus more]. We have become part of the problem. Jesus, on the other hand, promises a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. So our task is now to facilitate people bringing Jesus with them to the PTA, not asking them to come to church after the meeting to date Him. All in all, we’ve got take a look at some hard questions – ironically skimmed over in this trite article – and re-evaluate how well our missionary endeavors are reaching the natives.

What are some suggestions about how to reach those indigenous to a postmodern culture?

Try not to “reach” postmoderns. In fact, try not to think about big strategies at all, or even to appraise “them.” Instead, think of individual young adults, youth, college students or young professionals who need to be personally introduced to the life-giving power and meaning of a relationship with their Creator – and then think about how they might connect spiritually with Jesus. Begin with the people you know, and love them.

If you are going to try and begin a service geared towards postmoderns, please be aware that a service isn’t likely to reach anybody except those that already come to your church. We cannot “put something on” and expect new people just to come; rather, we must “go into all the world” and bring them Jesus.

Conclusion

Can you really expect a thought-provoking conclusion after a short article? If you figure this thing out, call me and explain it, preferably in small words and with the aid of colorful toys, so that I can understand. For now, love Jesus – lift Him up – and let the Holy Spirit guide you in your efforts to be faithful to the awesome responsibility we have of redeeming the earth.

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Resources

On the Web

<http://www.visions-york.org/gallery/services.html>

<http://www.churchnet.org.uk/>

<http://www.wibsite.com/faith/>

<http://alternativeworship.org/>

<http://www.emergentvillage.com/>

<http://emergingchurch.org/>

<http://www.embody.co.uk/archive/safe/list.html>

<http://www.theooze.com/main.cfm>

Books

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Brueggeman, Walter. Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1993.

Grenz, Stanley J. A Primer on Postmodernism: William B. Eerdmans, 1996.

Kimball, Dan. The Emerging Church. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.

Sweet, Len. Aqua Church. Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 1999.

_____. Out of the Question. Into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the Godlife Phenomenon: Waterbrook Press, 2004.

Tomlinson, Dave. The Post-Evangelical. Vol. Revised North American Edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: EmergentYS, 1995.