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Evangelism in a Postmodern World

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This paper does not start where most begin, i.e., trying to analyze or define postmodernity so we can build a church for them. Have not many church strategists tried to understand the postmodern paradigm shift, then design a strategy to reach them for Christ, and build a church for them? How successful have they been? Rather than looking philosophically at postmodernity, let's just suggest four things that will help you understand the movement: (1) INTERSTATE, (2) INTERNET, (3) CELL PHONE, and (4) SEINFELD.[1]

Postmodernity is perceived as the great evil threat against Christianity today much like the mobs that protested in Genoa, Italy, and Seattle, Washington, against the intrusion of global unification upon their individual causes; i.e., be that global warming, international trade agreements, nuclear treaties, etc. The Church, like the mob, is not sure what the enemy is, how to fight against it, what to do next, nor how to fix the world they perceive as broken. The Church, like the mob, is determined to destroy its avowed enemy before it destroys them, but the Church for the most part doesn't know what to do. So, what is the reaction of the Church to postmodernity?

We can respond to postmodernity in at least four different ways. First, we can ignore it, or dismiss it as J. I. Packer, theologian at Regents College said, "Postmodernism is a throw-away word that means everything, and nothing."[2] That means we would continue our Church as a "remnant" in an evil world, and like Elijah, retreat into the wilderness and pray, "Lord, I am the only one left, and now they're now trying to kill me too" (I Kgs.

19:10, NIV). Second, we can launch out with an attack against the evils of postmodernity to destroy its influence. If we do this, we must be careful that we are not attacking postmodernity to save modernity (most of us are influenced by the presuppositions of the modernity more than we realize).

> Oddly enough, with the passing of modernity, many Christians grieve as though the faith itself were passing away. To that incredible extent, the Western Church appropriated the modern worldview to such an extent that it cannot extinguish between modern thinking and Christian thinking. Instead of lamenting the passing of modernity and calling the troops to defend of what remains of that godless ideology, Christians need to see a gift that God has given to the Church and the collapse of modernity. Post modernity presents fewer barriers than modernity for evangelism, but they are different barriers. Post modernity threatens many evangelical scholars because it is new. Evangelicals have spent several centuries developing an arsenal of weapons to use against modernity. To change the playing field now seems unfair.[3]

Third, we can adopt postmodernity, and like many of the philosophers or apologists, we can embrace these pre-civilized forces, and assume a pre-enlightened identity. We can adopt the meaning of their words to preach the Gospel, adapt to their principles of building a church, and adapt to their needs to preach the Gospel. This means giving up our "civilized church tribe," and do evangelism to a pre-civilized or heatenistic culture, creating a new "re-tribalized" Church. The fourth strategy—what I suggest in this paper—is to focus on the Scriptures and the Great Commission with a view of presenting the true Church to all people. This means we must recognize that the collapse of local churches to the advancements of postmodernity is not the collapse of the true Church, but the collapse of an apostate church or a dead church. This fourth strategy suggests revival is the best course of evangelism, perhaps the only course.

Faced with the complexity of modernity, it seems many in Christianity want to be an expert on modernity, and many have suggested a solution to deal with postmodernity. Because postmodernity first reared its head through the rising generation called "baby boomers," certain authorities such as Thom Rainer[4]

and Gary McIntosh[5] wrote books telling the Church how to reach them and what the Church must do to keep them. Not to be outdone, Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek philosophy identified *seeker-driven* as a suggested method of reaching postmodern thinkers ("Unchurched Harry"). Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, modified the approach, suggesting our outreach must be *seeker sensitive*.[6] Leonard Sweet, the futurist thinker, suggested ways to reach postmodern *pilgrims*.[7] Then George Hunter told us we can reach these new barbarians (his word) by examining the *Celtic way of evangelism*.[8] A whole section of the Church has embraced signs, wonders, power evangelism and a return to the apostolic church.[9] Is this their answer to the Church's new playing field?

Every church leader seems to have a suggestion how to reach the postmodern. Warren Bird and I wrote a book entitled, *Into The Future: Turning Today's Church Trends into Tomorrow's Opportunities*.[10] This is a book I affectionately called, "The book of 14 piles." Bird and I examined the writings of approximately 100 different writers who each made a solid suggestion of what the future Church should do and become. We found there were 14 general hypotheses for suggested ministry. Then I sat on my living room floor and put each book into its appropriate pile; hence, 14 piles of books about the future of Church ministry. Then I said facetiously, "If you read this book, you don't have to read the other 100 books."

What can we learn from all of this? That there are many voices telling the Church how it can meet the challenge of postmodernity.

Beginning with Evangelism

However, this paper does not develop an evangelistic strategy based on the nature of the target and audience, i.e., postmodernity; but rather it develops a strategy beginning with the Word of God and the Great Commission. Therefore, we will begin our task by defining evangelism, then looking at our challenge of postmodernity through the eyes of the Great Commission to get a clearer understanding what should be the Church's response.

> Evangelism is communicating the Gospel in an understandable manner and motivating a person to respond to Christ and become a responsible member of his church.[11]

From this definition of evangelism, let's use the following five areas to examine postmodernity:

1. The Gospel: What message shall we preach?
2. Communication: How shall we contact them?
3. An understandable manner: What barriers shall we overcome?
4. Motivating them to respond: How shall we get the message across?
5. Responsible members of a church: What is the Church?

Answering these five questions will not guarantee success in ministry, nor will it even give a basic set of principles to minister in a postmodern world. But these answers will suggest certain presuppositions that can guide future ministry.

The Gospel: What Message Shall We Preach?

To the postmodern, words do not have meaning. Words only mean what current users attribute to them. Truth is not eternal, and it is certainly not decided by the modern scientific method, i.e., the way civilization has done it; nor do they accept truth from any religious sources. Truth is relative, and it has the meaning that has (a) been agreed upon, (b) or has been attributed by a user. Therefore, if the postmodernist view of words and truth is correct, then all of biblical Christianity collapses, because it would have no standardized meaning. But Christianity is grounded in objective truth that was established in historical objectivity.

> IF THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE TRUTH,
> THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE MORALITY.
> IF THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE STANDARD,
> THEN THERE IS NO SIN.
> IF THERE IS NO TRANSGRESSION,
> THEN THERE IS NO NEED FOR A SAVIOR.
> IF WE DO NOT NEED SALVATION,
> THEN THERE IS NO NEED FOR JESUS CHRIST.
> IF JESUS CHRIST IS NOT NECESSARY,
> THEN WHY THE CHURCH?

However, we have an "everlasting Gospel to preach" (Rev. 14:6) and "His truth endureth unto all generations" (Psalm 100:5). God is eternal and does not change, His message is the same from one generation to another, and from one changing

culture to another.

The Gospel is content, i.e., the message of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15:1-3). This is called the propositional truth of the Gospel, but the Gospel is also a person; it is Jesus Christ and He is the message of evangelism. "There is no other name . . . whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The average postmodern person rejects the Church for its hypocrisy, lethargy, or for its abuses. And many times the post-modern person is not without justification in rejecting the Church, because many local churches operate on earth as a man driven organization of biblical principles; but many of them are more "man-driven" than "biblical."

The postmodern person who rejects the contemporary Church would like its founder, Jesus Christ. He was as anti-bureaucratic as they are. He condemned religious shams of His age, as they condemn the religious sham of our postmodern age. Jesus was anti-bureaucratic in both His teaching and His life, as is the postmodern. In every sense of the word, Jesus was a revolutionary. But the problem is the revolution that Jesus began against the dead religions of His day, ultimately has been "encapsulated" in many dead spiritual institutions of our day.

The Church, which is called His Body (I Cor. 12:27), is representative of Jesus on this earth. As such, the visible Church is subject to the limitations of humanity, as was Jesus. But at the same time the Church is very much divine in its supernatural authority and power, as Jesus Christ in His human body was the God-Man. So the Church must be both an organism and an organization, but many times is not. So, what is our first step of outreach? To reach the postmodern, the local church must be the spiritual Church as intended by Jesus (Matthew 16:18).

Because of the power of God through local congregations and the history of God dwelling in His people, the Church has overcome every kind of opposition for approximately 2000 years. Therefore, we should not fear any new paradigm or any new set of rules that come from the postmodern generation. The Church and its Gospel message will endure, but will always be in conflict with culture. However, whether the Church will endure as a stronger or weaker institution is not seen, nor is it seen whether its conflict with culture will become more intense, or not. On too many occasions the Church has not known how to relate to culture. In Richard Niebuhr's book, *Christ and Culture,* he said that the Church has four relationships to culture: (1) the

Church *against* culture, (2) the Church *and* culture, (3) the Church *in* cultures, and (4) the Church *is* culture.[12]

But let's go back and examine who we are and what we've done. In the past decades, the Church has only been moderately successful in evangelizing America that was dominated by modern thinking. Even though America has a Protestant-Puritan ethic, and many think of America as "one nation under God," evangelism has only been moderately successful. Now that society is becoming more postmodern and post-Christian, do we think that we can become more successful in a different cultural paradigm by adapting to the restraints of different cultural "glue" that holds a different culture together? Just because many think that we will become less successful in preaching the Gospel to postmoderns, must we sever our emotional umbilical cord to modernity and embrace postmodernity?

Our question, "What message shall we preach?" has an answer. Thom Wolf the pastor at the Church on Brady in Los Angeles says, "The central issue of communicating the message of Christ will be on the person of Christ, and the uniqueness of the resurrection."[13] We must preach "the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

Communication: How Shall We Contact Them?

Years ago Francis Schaefer, our apologetic guru, asked a question, "How shall we then live?" But today's question is, "How shall we now communicate the Gospel?" When we are immersed into a world of changing words, and we deal with ideas that have no objective reality, and we are attacked by relevant morality and pluralistic suggestions of salvation; what is our response?

In the prior world of modernity, we responded with *argument absurdium.* Either we believe the truth of Christianity, or we accept atheism or agnosticism. But in today's society, postmodernity has challenged the fortress of civilization, and we will be forced to minister in a non-civilized environment characterized by diversity of meaning, diversity of morality, diversity of interpretation, and no "glue" to hold the future civilization together. Rather than throwing up our arms in defeat, Goetz says, "Postmodernism, for all its confusion, seems just one more opportunity for the church to do what it does best—be the church."[14] Goetz's article has an excellent discussion on the death of rationalism, the death of ideology, rejection of authority, i.e., the death

of civilization.

When we seek to evangelize the postmodern, let's not resort to dealing with external issues such as should we use rock-related music in worship? Should we use PowerPoint in preaching? And what should be our approach to casual dress in worship services? These are "band-aid" approaches to the conflicts of two opposing paradigms.

At the heart of the postmodern person is relationships, or as they call it, "connections." So we must learn how to connect to them as people, to deal with their real needs without compromising our message. Let's forget about our "marketing" mentality, and let's not call them "consumers." Let's not design a worship service like the world designs menus to appeal to postmodern appetites. But rather, let's pray for them to be convicted of their sins. Then, let's pray for the power of the Spirit to be poured out upon the preaching of the Gospel (Acts 2:17). Let's drop the cultural presuppositions of our modernity, and invite them to follow Jesus Christ. Remember His invitation was, "Follow Me" (John 1:43).

The Church must not major on obeying rules, creating institutionalized creeds, using condescending advertisements, and employing past-culturally biased images. We must even forget about advertising. I once said in 1969 to a Greater Chicago ministerial association, "We must sell Jesus as the world sells Coca-Cola." I was "beat up" by them in the following discussion because they thought I was dealing with *methods* when actually I was dealing with developing an *aggressive attitude*. But today, I would reject the commercial attitude of selling or advertising Jesus Christ. The Church must live and preach Jesus Christ.

George Hunter tells us that "today's churches are, for the most part, waiting for the barbarians to somehow find us and our institutional setting. Consequently, we are missing out on one of the greatest "apostolic adventures" available to Christians."[15] He's right. We must go to them personally with the message of Jesus Christ.

An Understandable Manner: What Barriers Shall We Overcome?

Every time we think of evangelizing, we must think of the barriers, opposition, or difficulties in presenting the Gospel. Obviously, Church Growth has given us an understanding of E-0 to E-3 barriers.[16] The E-0 barrier describes evangelizing those in the church, i.e., unsaved children born in the Church or those who

have transferred in membership but have not experienced conversion. The E-1 "stained-glass" barrier describes the difficulties of external things, i.e., location, facilities, name, lack of equipment, and lack of services. E-2 are the cultural and class barriers that hinder the presentation of the Gospel to people in their ethnic customs or culture. We must communicate the Gospel "crossculturally" so that the people hear and properly understand the message of Jesus Christ. As Donald McGavran has said, "People like to become Christians without having to cross racial, linguistic, or class barriers."[17] Finally, E-3 is a language barrier. Again, Donald McGavran said, "Each man likes to hear the Gospel in his own heart-language."[18] This means that people respond to the Gospel when it is preached to them in the language of their heart, or the language by which they think, i.e., not just a trade language.

We may find that postmodernity actually has fewer barriers to evangelism than modernity. While they have different meanings to words, values, and orientation to life; look at the postmodern as he or she encounters Jesus Christ. First, they acknowledge the supernatural and mystery of God. Second, they prize relationships. Remember Christianity is a relationship between them and God. Third, they value experience. Christianity is not head belief, nor is it just doctrine and creeds. But conversion is an experience that will transform their life when they become new creatures in Jesus Christ (II Cor. 5:17). Fourth, they think viscerally, not linearly. Since the viscera is the body cavity and they think with their total being; this is a truer picture of the New Testament concept of *belief*. Belief involves a total response of the person, i.e., intellect, emotion, and will, including self-perception and self-direction. The way to reach the postmodern is to call them to a New Testament concept of belief in Jesus Christ.

Motivating Them to Respond: How Shall We Get the Message Across?

The Church must not be afraid of itself. By that is meant the Church must not be afraid of the supernatural, i.e., power evangelism, prayer intervention, deliverance, transformation, and miracles.[19] The church of modernity is reflected in rationality, formula, and doctrine, but the Church that will be effective in a postmodern world must be both doctrinally based and experience-driven. It must operate in the realm of the supernatural. We must present the Gospel to people, challenging them to a rela-

tionship with the Creator of the universe, not to just join a church and accept the rules of Christianity. Our challenge is not just to help postmodern people accept the objective truth of Christianity, our challenge is to help postmodern people experience the life of God and relate personally to Jesus Christ, so they can experience eternal life.

Because God meets people as and where they are, let's not be surprised if God polishes today's methods differently for use with the postmodern world than He did in the world of modernity. As an illustration, God used apologetics, rational presentation, and logic when ministering to people in the world of modernity. Then let's not be surprised when God uses the supernatural, i.e., mystery, power evangelism and experiential praise worship to confront a postmodern world that does not think as logically as past generations, but appreciates experiential justification of its conclusions.

As a matter of fact, our traditional methods will not be as effective in the future, as they have been in the past. No one method of communicating the Gospel will be effective. Those who minister to the postmodern mention the following methods: narratives, parables, creative worship, testimonies, drama, small groups (cells), dialogue, answering questions and experiencing community.

Responsible Members of a Church: What is the Church?

The Great Commission was given on five different occasions, and each time Jesus added more understanding to the Commission, i.e., He added according to the receptivity of His disciples.[20] When the Great Commission was recorded in Matthew, its target was more than the conversion of individual people. Jesus said, "Matheteusate panta te ethne" (Matthew 28:19). This means that the Church has the task of discipling the nations, i.e., people groups. Therefore, from this command, we can assume certain things: First the word *ethne* implies we must get the Gospel into each ethnic group of people so that they become followers of Jesus Christ. Second, since discipling is an on-going challenge, we must get the message of Jesus Christ into the thinking, values, and life of each different ethnic group of people throughout the globe and throughout the ages. Third, effective evangelism implies winning people as a community and into a community, not just winning them as isolated individuals. Fourth, this challenge certainly includes evangelizing the post-

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moderns cross-culturally for they represent a different *ethne* from previous generations. Once they are won, they are to be baptized according to a Trinitarian formula, and then taught everything that Jesus passed on to the disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). So what can be said about getting people into a local church?

1. The success of the Church does not depend on continuation of a modernity culture, but the creation of a new Church that reflects the new culture.

2. Because Jesus Christ is with us, "Lo, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20), we do not have to fear a new set of rules, or paradigms from postmodernity; but rather, we must focus on the power of Jesus Christ and His Gospel, which will be our new set of rules and paradigms.

3. Our challenge is not to continue our traditions or culture from modernity, or to create new customs for postmoderns, but rather "immerse" every new believer into a community of like-faith believers from his culture, and then give him the commission to reach others in that culture.

4. Being a disciple involves more than knowing the facts of Christianity, it also involves following Jesus Christ; his or her Christianity is involved in experiences, relationships, learning, and serving.

5. To evangelize by making disciples is a decision and a process. This means we must acknowledge that individuals are at different levels of understanding, feeling and readiness to respond to the Gospel. We must understand that following Jesus Christ is a *decision* when the person chooses to follow Jesus Christ, and then it becomes a *process* as the person continues to follow Jesus Christ.

6. The challenge is to evangelize every person in every culture so that he or she believes in Jesus Christ. Then, each one must "inculturate" Christ into his/her life and thinking, which involves making disciples within each ethnic group. That means we will not change the Church into the expectations of the postmodern, but let's aim to transform them into the image of Jesus Christ. While many postmoderns will start farther away from Christ than their predecessors in culturally-Christian America, and it may take them longer to be assimilated into a cul-

turally-Christian church in America, they can be assimi-
lated quickly into their ethnic church that has "incul-
turated" Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The challenge of reaching postmoderns for Christ is no dif-
ferent from past challenges of evangelizing un-reached tribes
and nations with cultures different from the ones sending out
missionaries or evangelists. The challenge of cross-cultural
evangelism is the same while the conditions of the culture are
new. Let's remember that God remains the same, His principles
never change, and Jesus promises, "Lo, I am with you always,
even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NKJV).

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NOTES

1. *Interstate* represents transportation so that in the postmodern
world, almost anyone can go almost anywhere, can experience almost
anything with no boundaries. The *Internet* represents knowledge and
media, almost anyone can know just about anything about everything
(including definitions of words and encyclopedia data), plus be enter-
tained by the same *Internet* media. The *Cell Phone* represents communi-
cation, almost anyone can communicate with almost anyone at any
time. *Seinfeld* stands for relationships that have become the meaning of
life, and the measure of truth.

2. As quoted by David L. Goetz, "The Riddle of Our Postmodern
Culture: What is Postmodernism? Should we even care?" *Leadership*
(Winter, 1997): 53.

3. Harry L. Poe, "Making the Most of Postmodernity," *Journal of the
Academy for Evangelism* (vol. 13, 1997-1998): 67.

4. Thomas Rainer, *The Bridger Generation: America's Second Largest
Generation, What They Believe, How to Reach Them* (Nashville: Broadman

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& Holman, 1997).

5. Gary McIntosh, *Three Generations* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1995).

6. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

7. Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 112-113.

8. George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach The West Again* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 96.

9. C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles and Prophets* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2000); see also *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1998).

10. Elmer Towns and Warren Bird, *Into the Future: Turning Today's Church Trends into Tomorrow's Opportunities* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2000).

11. This definition of evangelism was the "controlling" standard for *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth*, Elmer L. Towns, senior editor, Ventura, CA, Regal Books, 1995. See article on "*Evangelism*" on page 205ff. Members of the executive editorial committee for this encyclopedia are: Dr. Robert Coleman, Billy Graham Center of Evangelism, Wheaton, IL; Dr. Lewis Drummond, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, AL; Dr. Gary Greig, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA; Dr. Kent Hunter, Church Growth Center, Corunna, IN; Dr. Charles Kelly, Director, Center of Evangelism and Church Growth, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA; Dr. Gary McIntosh, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA; Dr. Paige Patterson, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC; Dr. Thom S. Rainer, Dean, The Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY; Dr. Alvin L. Reid, Bailey Smith Chair of Evangelism, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC; Dr. John Vaughan, Southwestern Baptist University, Bolivar, MO; and Dr. C. Peter Wagner, Donald McGavran Chair of Missions and Church Growth, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA.

12. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977).

13. As quoted by Will McRaney in his article, "The Evangelistic Conversation in an Increasingly Postmodern America," *Journal of the American Society of Church Growth* (vol. 12, 2001), 90, quoting a paper entitled "Postmodernity and the Urban Church Agenda" that Thom Wolf gave at the American Society for Church Growth Annual Conference, November 1997, Orlando, Florida.

14. Goetz, 56.

15. George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*: *How Christianity*

Can Reach the West Again (Abingdon: Nashville, 2000), 21, 121.

16. Elmer L. Towns, Ed. "Evangelism: P-1, P-2, P-3," *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 212.

17. Donald A. McGavran, as cited by Elmer L. Towns, *Practical Encyclopedia: Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 264.

18. Ibid.

19. While I believe the day of sign-miracles has passed, i.e., the ability to do miracles as a demonstration sign to validate the message of Christianity; I do not believe the day of miracles has passed. Every answer to prayer is a miracle, just as every healing. And then God does "epochs," which means God intervenes in the affairs of life, God delivers people from addiction, God transforms every part of a person's life, i.e., thinking, feeling, desires, and self-perceptions. Christianity is both rational and experiential.

20. Towns, *A Practical Encyclopedia*, 97-98.