

Reaching the Postmodern Generation

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The Gospel of Jesus Christ is both universal and unchanging, whereas the culture to which it is proclaimed is forever local and evolving. The collision of these two facts creates the tension of the Church's mission in each generation. It is important that we feel this pull. But in solving the tension we are tempted to tinker with the message—to change things in order to sound relevant and attractive. Or we are tempted to take an apathetic reception to the Gospel as a personal affront and to leave those outside the Church to “get what they deserve.” We can avoid both sides of this temptation by following the example of the Incarnation in our ministry.

Sin had estranged us from God; but, rather than leaving us to our fate, God saw our plight as His problem and took the initiative in reconciliation. He came to our turf and overcame our hostility without ever pretending that we were not abject losers. How does the model of the Incarnation play out in culture today? Ministry to our postmodern society does not require the invention of a new message or technique. The Church has the unchanging message of ultimate relevance, and our history already contains examples of every form of communication. What our situation does require is listening, creativity and authenticity.

Listening

Prior to proclaiming the Gospel, we must listen. This is harder work than most people realize. We must try to understand the voices of those around us and hear their questions rather than telling them what they should be asking. Sadly, the Church is not famous for listening, but is thought of more like that guy at the party who is only interested in what he has to say himself. We then often justify our self-absorption by telling ourselves that this is what it means to “know only Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). But if we are not sincerely interested in the opinions of our neighbors, we are not being incarnational.

As we listen, what we will hear around us is a mixture of broken family trust, the shrill voice of a hyper-driven media and the substitution of ‘perspective’ for truth. We will hear voices which are bored, cynical and profoundly unimpressed by a Gospel which all too often appears to them to be merely verbal or mental. These people assume the Gospel is simply another sales pitch with ulterior motives tucked away in the background.

These presuppositions have huge ramifications for how our message will be heard by those we try to contact. The first Reformation was the re-discovery of the theology of Paul—of God's grace given freely to wholly undeserving sinners. A second, postmodern reformation will require the complementary re-discovery of the theology of James—that faith is always mani-

fested. Postmoderns want to see the fruit of a message before they check into its doctrines. This is not a return to an anemic social gospel; this is a biblical response of gratitude to God manifested in concern for others.

As we present the Gospel, we face a theological challenge. Whereas most of us in the Church may have had a sense of condemnation and a need for forgiveness which drove us to Jesus, our contemporary society has no conception of such feelings. They suffer beneath a sense of meaninglessness rather than guilt. They are guilty, but they do not realize they need salvation from anything. The word sin is only used ironically.

Creativity

As we begin to understand this culture through listening, the Church must also be creative and unpredictable in presenting its message. We can no longer expect our neighbors to come to our meetings at our buildings, but must imitate God who in the Incarnation caught us all by surprise—"Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46).

There are many ways the Church can make similar contact. One example is the "Friday Nights with the Institute" series hosted by Covenant Seminary at a local, secular bookstore. The series features lectures and discussions on a broad range of topics held in the rough and tumble of the marketplace. It is a means to capture non-Christians in a neutral environment and in the mood to talk about issues. People have grown intolerant of monologue and demand a chance to voice their doubts and disagreements. The Church needs to find creative means of providing that opportunity.

Authenticity

Besides listening and creativity, ministry to a postmodern culture requires authenticity. Relationships must be formed with a long-term view toward trust-building with a people who lack community. It is enormously important to remember that our neighbors frequently lack an experience of trust and continuity in their backgrounds. Christian love and fellowship may be the first element used by the Holy Spirit to awaken their interest, but this atmosphere of concern must be genuine. If it is not, our generation will smell the hypocrisy and use it as evidence against the Gospel's truth.

Currently, we are called to suffer for the Gospel—but in our postmodern culture that call is mainly to suffer inconvenience, because people are messy and inconvenient. The Church must have time for people who are in a hurry going nowhere in particular. We have to prove that we are "for real," that the Gospel changes everything in our everyday situations, and that it matters that we are Christians before our funerals. We must be patient and thick-skinned because mission service to the cynical and bored is not a comfortable prospect.

Older methods of apologetics and evangelism remain necessary. We must still call people to obey Christ; we must still answer people's questions, but more and more these calls must occur with "ongoingness." The one-time conversation or altar call seem very foreign to those who are distant from the Church. The "motto" of Francis Schaeffer is more germane than ever: "To show forth by demonstration in our lives and work the existence of God."

The techniques needed to reach out to postmoderns are the well-worn principles of regular

communication: a hospitable atmosphere, listening as much as we speak, and soliciting rather than avoiding questions. Nothing whizbang here; no new methodology—but when you pause to consider our own fallen condition and self-centeredness, these basic principles need constant rediscovery.

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