

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Challenges and Innovative Ministry Strategies to Reach Generation X and
Other Postmoderns

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Challenges and Innovative Ministry Strategies to Reach Generation X and Other Postmoderns

Introduction

“The establishment of the Christian Church in Western culture (*Christendom*) is dead.”¹ These are powerful and disturbing words to those of us who have been raised in a culture and a generation that values both the institution of the church and the gospel it preaches. What would possess Leonard Sweet to make such a statement? The answer is found in a cultural paradigm shift called postmodernism.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the church can effectively minister in a postmodern world. In order to accomplish this purpose, several issues will be explored. Obviously, we must understand postmodernism and postmoderns: what it is and who they are. We must examine if our modern ministry models are effective or ineffective toward reaching postmoderns. If they are ineffective, we must discuss changes that need to be made in order to more adequately communicate the gospel to the postmodern world. During these discussions, we must determine the impact these changes will have on the traditional church model.

Postmodernism has placed the church in a critical position. If the church responds inadequately to the demands of postmodernism, much will be lost to the Kingdom of God. If the church, however, responds adequately to the postmodern challenge, the potential gain to the Kingdom of God is beyond the scope of imagination. Following is a

¹ Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture* (Loveland, Colorado: Group, 1999), 95.

suggested strategy to how the church can respond to the challenges of postmodernism and its siblings, particularly those of the so-called Generation X.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is an elusive term and the ideology it represents is hard to define. The reason is that postmodernism is not so much a consistent, coherent worldview but rather a reaction to the worldview called modernism which has been the bedrock of understanding and interpretation in the West since the age of the Enlightenment. In the words of Michael Slaughter, “Post-modernity is an in-between time, a *not yet* time, or a hinge point in history.”² Modernity is passing away and what is to replace it is not yet fully known. This reactionary view called postmodernism is the transition period between the two.

David Henderson states, “Postmodernism is not so much a new worldview as it is the death of any coherent worldview.”³ The coherent worldview known as modernism stresses there is a life of order centered around rational and scientific thought.⁴ Centeredness and orderliness dominates those possessed of the modern way of thinking and viewing life. Postmoderns, on the other hand, declare the world to have no center, there is no *uni* in *universe*.⁵ Postmoderns can affirm many different worldviews and ideologies, some in opposition to each other, and consider all of them valid and true. Thus, Grenz states concerning postmoderns:

² Michael Slaughter, *Out on the Edge: A Wake-Up Call for Church Leaders On the Edge of the Media Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdom Press, 1998), 31.

³ David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift: Communicating God’s Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 192.

⁴ Sweet, 23.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 7.

They believe that beliefs are ultimately a matter of social context, and hence they are likely to conclude, “What is right for us might not be right for you,” and “What is wrong in our context might in your context be acceptable or even preferable.”⁶

Pluralism, relativism, and tolerance are hallmarks of postmodern thought.

Because of postmodern’s propensity toward pluralism and relativism, objective, propositional truth is set aside and those who hold to its possibility are viewed as intolerant. An understanding of the postmodern’s view of truth is crucial to the church’s ability, or lack thereof, to communicate the message of Christ’s gospel.

In postmodern thinking, “there is no truth or falsehood, only choices.”⁷

Additionally, “truth is not so much found as created. What is true is what one believes to be true.”⁸ To put it mildly, postmoderns view truth as an extremely subjective issue.

Truth cannot be tied to any objective standard. Absolute truth is absolutely impossible to know or comprehend. Tony Jones sums it up by indicating that, with postmoderns, objectivity is out, subjectivity is in; question everything; and there is no Truth with a capital “T”, one person’s truth is another person’s theory.⁹

Obviously, postmoderns have rejected the idea that objective truth, with the understanding and pursuit of it, forms the basis or the center of our existence and purpose in life. So what has replaced truth in the postmodern quest for identity and understanding? Long states, “Since this generation cannot find its center in objective truth, it has moved to finding or defining its center in community.”¹⁰ Long further

⁶Ibid., 15.

⁷ Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope: A Strategy for Reaching the Postmodern Generation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 57.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 26.

¹⁰ Long, 71.

comments, “Truth is relative to the community in which we participate...Only those within our own community or tribe have the right to comment or criticize our truth.”¹¹

Community and networking are important values for the postmodern generations.

Because truth is subjective for the postmodern person, it obviously flows from one’s experience. Henderson, in speaking of ways to communicate to postmodern hearers, states, “Hearers today don’t begin anywhere near where we do. For them there is no truth, no God, no certainty, no authority, no objective reality, no purpose. The only sure thing for the postmodern person is his or her experience.”¹² For the postmodern, a shared experience, or at least attempting to understand another person’s experience, forms part of the basis for determining truth.

This emphasis on experience further diminishes the role that rational or objective truth plays in the mind of the postmodern person. Grenz states:

Postmoderns question the concept of universal truth discovered and proved through rational endeavors. They are unwilling to allow the human intellect to serve as the sole determiner of what we should believe. Postmoderns look beyond reason to nonrational ways of knowing, conferring heightened status on the emotions and intuition.¹³

Slaughter agrees, “Post-modernity rejects the rigid, narrow idea that all truth can be known or measured solely by the scientific method. Life is too complex to limit our understanding of the cosmos strictly to matter alone.”¹⁴

This emphasis on finding and knowing truth through intuition and emotion means that postmoderns are open to the spiritual and supernatural. However, they are very much

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Henderson, 214.

¹³ Grenz, 13-14.

¹⁴ Slaughter, 32.

opposed to organized religion. Long affirms that the postmodern mindset has an openness to the supernatural and that among postmoderns there is a strong interest in the transcendent God.¹⁵ Glen Davis affirms that talk about religion is out today, but many people are open to talking about spirituality.¹⁶

One final aspect of postmodernism that is germane to our discussion is postmodernism's negative viewpoint on life and societal progress. Grenz points out, "Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world's great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents."¹⁷ This grim view of societal progress leads Grenz to further state, "The postmodern consciousness has abandoned the Enlightenment belief in inevitable progress...The postmodern generation is also convinced that life on the earth is fragile."¹⁸

Because of postmodernism's jettison of objective truth and its embracing of a centerless existence, hopelessness and confusion are trademarks of this generation.

Robert Bellah tells of a Harvard graduate, educated via the mindset of postmodernism, who at his graduation stated:

I believe that there is one idea, one sentiment, which we have all acquired at some point in our Harvard careers, and that ladies and gentlemen is in a word, confusion...They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we do not believe them to be true.¹⁹

¹⁵ Long, 150-51.

¹⁶ Glen Davis, Class Notebook, 2-65.

¹⁷ Grenz, 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Robert Bellah, *The Good Society* (New York, Vintage, 1991), 43-44.

The sum total of this student's Harvard experience, it seems, is an exercise in futility. To those of a pure postmodern mindset, if such people truly exist, life is hopeless and has no meaning. Yet the postmodern quest for spirituality seems to suggest that postmodern men and women yearn for something beyond the hopelessness and the helplessness.

Generation X

Against the backdrop of the above discussion on postmodernism, we now introduce the first truly postmodern generation, Generation X. Born sometime between 1965 and 1981-82, Generation X is comprised of individuals who are also known as the Throw-Away Generation, the Postponed Generation, the Buster Generation, or perhaps the Neglected/Ignored Generation. All of these titles are appropriate and speak to issues that this generation is either a product of or has had to face in its maturing process.

Basically the children of oftentimes dysfunctional, career-driven Boomer parents, Generation X came along at the same time that Boomers were stressing their humanistic individualism. A woman's right to abortion was highly valued among Boomers, thus Generation Xers, in the womb, were viewed as disposable. The birth rate among Boomers steadily declined resulting in fewer Xers being born and they grew up during the latch-key kid era. Basically, Generation X, those fortunate enough to survive birth, were ignored by parents and grew up on their own.

Obviously, Xers are a breed apart from preceding generations due to the societal matrix into which they were born. However, in order to fully understand Generation X, we must add the element of postmodernism. Not only is Generation X different because

of its social context, it is different because of its philosophical context as well. Long states:

Certainly within Generation X we have a reaction to the excesses of the baby-boom generation. Xers' emphases on relationships versus careers and surviving versus striving are certainly reactions to the baby boomers. However, in addition to these incremental changes, some major changes are occurring with Generation X, which cannot be explained away as a reaction or a correction to the baby-boom generation. These changes can best be explained by the influence of postmodernism.²⁰

To reiterate, Generation X is the first truly postmodern generation.

As Generation X has progressed into adulthood, it has both acted and reacted to life based on its tragic heritage and its postmodern worldview. William Willimon states, "While our generation [Boomer] was obsessed by the search for freedom, this generation is searching for 'roots, stability, order, and identity.'"²¹ Xers are finding these roots, stability, order, and identity basically in community. Because Xers often come from dysfunctional families steeped in individualism, they are moving away from the autonomous self concept to a community orientation.²²

Community (friends), not family, is the basic social context in which Xers find value, purpose, and self-worth. Long says, "Generation X is helping to form a new, extended American family...Xers are turning more and more to their friends as a new family."²³

Because divorce among parents was so widespread in their past, Generation X puts family and friends first and job second. They spend more time with their children

²⁰ Long, 76.

²¹ William Willimon, "Reaching and Teaching the Abandoned Generation," *Christian Century*, October 20, 1993, 1016-19.

²² Long, 112.

²³ *Ibid.*, 50.

due to the fact they were neglected as children and perhaps because one-third of all Xers were physically or sexually abused as children.²⁴

Probably because of a lack of genuine role-models:

...postmodern Xers have no faith in institutions and put little stock in a chain of command. Their respect is earned, not demanded. While not attacking hierarchy directly, they just ignore authority or work around it...²⁵

Sweet declares, "Postmoderns are not devoted to their jobs or the institutions that employ them. They are devoted to challenges in which they can express themselves and unleash their creativity."²⁶ What is often viewed as Xer slackness or laxness is probably nothing more than boredom and lack of empowerment.

As with all those steeped in postmodernism, Generation X processes truth relationally rather than propositionally.²⁷ Truth resides in the community of which they are a part and in which they put their trust. This relational aspect also helps to form the only absolute that Xers recognize: a person's story. In the eyes of the Xer, everyone's story is worth listening to and is free from argumentation.²⁸ Of course, Xers expect others to take time to listen to their story as well.

George Barna reports, "Eighty-one percent of busters don't believe there's absolute truth."²⁹ Andres Tapia, in commenting on Barna's statement, says, "For the Xer,

²⁴ Ibid., 43-47.

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Sweet, 212.

²⁷ Dieter Zander, "The Gospel for Generation X," *Leadership*, Spring 1995, 40.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ George Barna, quoted in Andres Tapia, "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 21.

experience trumps dogma.”³⁰ Generation X is more concerned with seeing people walk their creed than hearing them simply recite or defend their creed.

Because of the social and moral climate in which the Xer generation was born and raised, Xers are basically pessimistic, aimless, and disillusioned.³¹ Many do not believe they will have it better than their parents and do not know if they can truly make a difference in the world, but they want to. Zander states, “Since they feel they can’t win on a large scale, some busters look to win on a small scale—in relationships, or local causes, or personal contributions to global needs.”³²

Lastly, as we look at this first postmodern generation, we must note that Xers are into spirituality. To quote Zander again, “...busters are looking for transcendent meaning...they are a spiritual generation...they believe that something is wrong with the world, and that there must be something beyond what they can see, feel, touch, taste, and smell.”³³ However, this trend toward spirituality does not equate into Christian church attendance or adherence. Only twenty-five percent of Xers attend church on a regular basis leaving about fifty million Xers without any church affiliation.³⁴ As a matter of fact, Generation X may be more susceptible than previous generations to false cults, false religions, and self-made spiritual paths.

³⁰ Andres Tapia, “Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation,” *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 21.

³¹ Henderson, 197.

³² Zander, 39.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Craig K. Miller, Class Notes, 1-40.

Modern Ministry Models and Postmodern People

To say the least, postmodernism and Generation X provide the church with a complex ministry challenge. The basic question that must be asked in regard to this challenge is, “Are the methods the church employed in the modern era able to meet the challenges of the postmodern era?”

The modern approach to ministry is based on an understanding and acceptance of objective truth, rational apologetics, emphasis on self-determination, and crisis evangelism. Traditional evangelism is closely akin and dependent upon modernity. Evangelicals, speaking to generations who accept the worldview of modernity, use reason and the scientific approach to convince people of the reality of God and the truth of the Bible. Evangelicals call for a personal commitment through a crisis-moment of conversion. Evangelicals preach by beginning with propositional truth which is understood to be accepted by all or defensible by resorting to logical and rational apologetics.³⁵

The problem with the above scenario is, in the words of Henderson, “...the address of the world has changed...The world has moved, but it neglected to send a change of address card. We keep delivering the same words to the old address, but no one is home.”³⁶ Henderson is simply saying that the postmodern mind is just not on the same page with the modern mind, it is not even in the same book! Barna states, “In terms of evangelism, we have a generation coming up that doesn’t speak the same language, doesn’t go to the same places, doesn’t have the same needs, and isn’t looking to

³⁵ Grenz, 161.

³⁶ Henderson, 16.

Christianity to answer their spiritual concerns.”³⁷ Simply put, we live in a post-Christian, postmodern world and our approaches to communicating the gospel, based on modernity, are falling on deaf ears.

It should be obvious to even the most casual reader that if the church is to communicate the gospel in a postmodern context, the church must learn to communicate cross-culturally to the postmodern world.

Cross-Culturally Communicating the Gospel to The Postmodern World, Especially Generation X

Unfortunately, some in the church doubt the need for changing anything about the way the church has and continues to function. Perhaps they say, “It is the postmoderns that have changed. If they want my faith, my God, my church, let them change to think and act like me.” However, this type of attitude is anti-missional. If we are to engage our culture for Christ, we must have a missional mindset. Speaking of this missional mindset, Darrell Guder and associates state, “There is but one way to be the church, and that is incarnationally, within a specific concrete setting. The gospel is always translated into a culture...”³⁸ They go on to say, “...the church’s essence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity.”³⁹ Additionally, Guder and associates declare:

One of the tasks of the church is to translate the gospel so that the surrounding culture can understand it, yet help those believers who have been in that culture move toward living according to the behaviors and communal identity of God’s missional people...⁴⁰

³⁷ Barna, 18.

³⁸ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 11.

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 114.

To deny this missional calling is to become irrelevant to the culture. Unfortunately, this is exactly what the traditional church, based on modernity, has become to the postmodern world, irrelevant. Sweet describes the postmodern culture as being “at best indifferent, at worst hostile to Christianity.”⁴¹ Guder and associates say, “Today’s Generation Xers...find little in the church that promises an answer to their quest for meaning and connection.”⁴² Obviously, the church is not doing a good job communicating cross-culturally to the postmodern generations.

Unfortunately, churches do not change easily. Tradition, stability, and dogma better characterize the traditional church than does the aspect of change. Traditional churches generally engage in the activity of preserving the past. However, in the words of Long, “To effectively minister in a postmodern culture, we first have to admit that we are in a new city and not waste time longing for our former city, the Enlightenment.”⁴³ Longing for the past, the “good old days,” will only increase the church’s inability to reach a lost and dying postmodern culture.

Long also postulates, “Some Christian leaders see this generation as a lost cause.”⁴⁴ The issues facing the church in trying to reach the postmodern mind are complex and intimidating. Generation X does not accept the authority-base of the church or its ministry. Postmoderns are pluralistic, syncretistic, and steeped in relativism. However, Long further notes that perhaps it is not so much the complexity of the

⁴¹ Sweet, 95.

⁴² Guder, 44.

⁴³ Long, 78.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

postmodern mind that is the issue. Rather, the issue could be that "...our traditional methods of ministry are loosing the cause for us."⁴⁵

Cross-culturally communicating the message of the Bible to the postmodern mindset is viewed by some as compromising the Bible's message in order to be palatable to the hearer. Some have even gone so far as to characterize this approach as a "gospel of accommodation."⁴⁶ Obviously, these are strong accusations and should be treated seriously. Are those who are willing to change their modernity-based modality for a method more understood by the postmodern mind compromising and accommodating the gospel?

Henderson helps to answer the above question by stating:

Our commitment to the authority of the Bible will press us to ask *what* we should communicate...while our commitment to be sensitive to our audience will nudge us to ask *how* best to communicate it.⁴⁷

But isn't being audience-sensitive or seeker-sensitive the same thing as compromising or accommodating the gospel? Henderson doesn't think so for he says,

The church needs to be mindful of the difference between being audience sensitive and audience driven. To be audience sensitive is to ask what can be done to make the words of Scripture better *understood* by today's unchurched audiences. Audience sensitivity begins with a commitment to the authority of God's Word. It is God who has the final say about what is and what isn't said. To be audience driven, on the other hand, is to ask what needs to change to make the message more *acceptable*—inoffensive for the unchurched person, easy, safe, comfortable, nonconfrontational. Audience drivenness begins and ends with the authority of the audience. It is the listener who has the final say.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ David Wilkerson, "The Dangers of the Gospel of Accommodation," *Enrichment* Volume Four - Number One (Winter 1999): 79.

⁴⁷ Henderson, 17.

Making the message of the gospel *understandable* is the focus of being sensitive to the culture of those hearing the message and is a basic requirement of cross-cultural communication. Making the gospel *acceptable* to its hearers is an unacceptable posture for the cross-cultural communicator who accepts the authority of God's word.

In reaching out to a postmodern culture, the church must engage in the task of cross-cultural communication. Our Western society is basically a postmodern mission field. The church must learn the language and culture of the postmodern people which comprise the church's mission. The question becomes, "But how do we do that? How do we develop innovative ministry strategies to reach our postmodern world?"

Strategies to Reach Generation X and Other Postmoderns

For a church to decide that it needs a strategy for reaching postmoderns is a giant step in the right direction. Intentionality is a true characteristic of those who become serious about communicating the gospel to their culture. Intentionality involves proper assessment of one's present effectiveness, assessment of one's ministry context (target audience), and assessment of one's current resources and needed resources. Intentionality is the first step in an overall ministry strategy to reach a postmodern culture or any culture.

We have already determined that the effectiveness of a church steeped in modernity is not insufficient to reach a postmodern world. Therefore, a church that wishes to be effective must determine who its target audience is to be. If a church decides it wants to only target moderns, basically Builders and older Boomers, much of the modality of the church will not need to change. But if a church senses that its God-given

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.

mission is to also reach out to the postmodern culture surrounding it, a great deal, if not all, of its modern-based modality will need to be replaced or at least radically altered. This type of deep change can result in a division within a church or even the death of a church. Obviously, church leadership must be willing and able to cast a compelling vision in order for a traditional church to take such a step. An alternative to such a radical change is to begin a separate, Gen X ministry within the church and retain the traditional service or to mother a Gen X church away from the main campus.

Once the decision is made to move toward structuring the ministry of the church to reach a postmodern world, current ways of evangelism, discipleship, worship, preaching/teaching, and outreach ministry must be viewed in light of the postmodern context. We will discuss these aspects of the overall ministry of the church in order in the following paragraphs.

Postmodern evangelism is different than evangelism based on the church's paradigm of modernity. Because of Generation X's commitment to community, its disdain of the notion of objective truth, and its distrust of organized religion, relational evangelism works best. Tim Celek and Dieter Zander state, "We think more and more evangelism is going to happen through relationships. The gospel is going to be communicated more incarnationally than propositionally or cognitively."⁴⁹ Eddie Gibbs gives this insight concerning this relational or incarnational type of evangelism:

...a brief presentation of the Gospel, immediately followed by a challenge to "receive Christ," is no longer adequate. More often than not, they will first need to be befriended by a Christian and linked to a small group of

⁴⁹ Tim Celek and Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 106.

believers who can demonstrate the benefits and challenges of following Christ.⁵⁰

At least with postmoderns, the day of door to door evangelism and the *Four Spiritual Laws* is gone. Relational evangelism is the order of the day if reaching Generation X is to be the focus of the church.

Closely related to relational evangelism is relational apologetics. When asked what are the key-essentials for churches that desire to reach postmodern people, Stanley Grenz replies, “The ultimate key is community. The best apologetic we have in the postmodern context is the vibrant local community of disciples who are loyal to Christ...”⁵¹ Long adds, “...our apologetic strategies need to change. We need to emphasize living the truth versus only talking about the truth. The lives of Christians will become more important to seekers as evidence to use in deciding whether or not to follow Christ.”⁵²

This relational evangelism/apologetic approach is highly successful because of Generation X’s postmodern way of processing and determining what is truth for them. We must remember that postmoderns process truth via the community they are a part of. Long says, “Xers cannot be convinced by rational argument because they do not believe in absolute truth. However, because of their commitment to community, they are impressed with the truth lived out in community.”⁵³ Long adds:

...the greatest apologetic for Christianity is not a well-reasoned argument but a wildly loving community. Our Lord did not say that they will know us by our truth—as important as this is—but by our love.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Eddie Gibbs, “Churches in Cultural Transition,” *Strategies for Today’s Leader*, Summer 2000, 7.

⁵¹ Stanley Grenz, *Interview with Stanley Grenz*, <http://www.next-wave.org/may99/Sg.htm>, May 18, 1999.

⁵² Long, 78-79.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.

Generation X is not asking if what we are saying is true, they are seeking to know if what we are as Christians is real. Experiencing Christ's love is more important than being only informed of Christ's love.⁵⁵

However, postmodern evangelism and apologetics must also have some type of verbal expression tied to it. But this verbal evangelistic/apologetic content is quite different from the content used in the days of modernity. In the words of Sweet, "Postmodern evangelism is telling the stories of Jesus to everyone who will listen."⁵⁶ We must remember that for the postmodern, a person's story is the only absolute they accept. Zander indicates that we must rely on the power of story if we are to communicate with the postmodern world.⁵⁷

This aspect of story-telling is known as narrative evangelism and it flies in the face of the Evangelical's traditional basis upon which to establish truth and fact. Doctrine (truth and fact) is to be based on the didactic portions of scripture, not narrative. Truth is a head-thing. Stories only touch the heart, the realm of the emotion. But with Generation X that is exactly the point. Postmodern people live more from the heart, not the head. They want to experience the divine, not just know about him.⁵⁸ Long says:

...the church needs to start telling the story by helping others to consider the plausibility and authenticity of the gospel, not by making a rational defense of its credibility. Narrative evangelism merges "our story" with "God's story" through sharing it with others. Narrative evangelism is preferred in a postmodern context.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Ibid., 210.

⁵⁶ Sweet, 201.

⁵⁷ Zander, 40.

⁵⁸ Long, 177.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 188.

It should be noted that narrative evangelism is not a new thing. James Barr points out:

Have you ever wondered why Jesus primarily used stories while Paul primarily used rational arguments? The answer lies in the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought. Greek thought was static, emphasizing contemplation or thinking, while Hebrew thought was dynamic, emphasizing action. Greek thought was more abstract while Hebrew thought was more concrete. Greek thought looked at the individual component, thereby splitting body and soul or heart and mind, while Hebrew thought looked at the totality of the whole, thereby combining the heart and mind within the heart or gut.⁶⁰

The point of Barr's statement is not that Jesus' approach was better than Paul's approach. The point is, they were communicating to different audiences who processed truth and reality differently. Paul's approach works well with people of modernity. Jesus' approach works well with postmodern Xers.

However, this relational and narrative evangelistic approach takes time and determination. Generation X will only be willing to listen to our story if we are willing to spend time listening to their story and not passing judgment on them immediately. Sweet says, "If you want this culture to hear your story, you must listen to a lot of stories you find offensive and troublesome."⁶¹ Long agrees when he says:

...listen to Xers. Let them tell you their stories about their family or friends or their economic future or their view of religion. Trust is developed by listening to and then caring for Xers as people who have deep longings and considerable pain...Trust takes time to develop. Come as a friend in the journey of life, not as a rescuer.⁶²

10. ⁶⁰ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Languages* (Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1961),

⁶¹ Sweet, 201.

⁶² Long, 53.

Xers do not want a Bible-Answer-Man to tell them what is true and what is not. Xers want someone who is willing to listen to them and willing to share with them honest answers to tough questions. Long says:

...we need to lead people to discover the truth for themselves instead of telling them what to believe. Xers do not like being told anything. However, they are willing to discuss things. They are suspicious of people who arrogantly claim to know the truth.⁶³

Zander states,

To reach busters means someone will need to spend time with them, someone who feels comfortable sharing why he or she became a Christian, someone willing to expose the work of Christ in his or her life. This approach is labor-intensive...But they will listen to your story, especially if it honestly describes the difficult as well as the good aspects of following Christ. They will listen to the story of someone who hasn't necessarily been successful but has been faithful.⁶⁴

The type of open, honest, and time-consuming postmodern approach to evangelism described above will involve a different mind-set than what exists in many traditional churches today. This is not church as usual but a radical evangelistic approach that will take great commitment on the part of those who pursue it. However, the reward can be great. Jeff Shriver says:

If the church could provide hope without triumphalism and present costly discipleship without pat answers, then just maybe the shroud of cynicism [that Gen Xers have toward the church] would fade and Xers would wander back through the door of the church."⁶⁵

But evangelism is only the beginning of the process that the church must employ to assimilate this postmodern generation into the Church of Jesus Christ. Postmoderns must be disciplined. As a matter of fact, relational evangelism and postmodern

⁶³ Long, 193.

⁶⁴ Zander, 40.

⁶⁵ Jeff Shriver, "Bridging the Gap: Generation X Challenges the Church," *Prism*, May 1994, 9.

discipleship are closing linked together. This tie between evangelism and discipleship is another paradigm shift that the traditional church must process appropriately if it is to reach its postmodern culture. Zander explains:

In years past, becoming a Christian preceded becoming a church attender. That sequence is no longer valid with busters. Incredibly, they may be part of a fellowship for months or years before taking that first step of faith. Churches effective at reaching busters for Christ encourage nonbelieving busters to participate in small groups or other ministries...Busters are attracted to Christ by being attracted to what's happening in the lives of Christians. We need to find ways to make non-believing busters feels welcome and participate—even before they provide evidence of commitment to Christ.⁶⁶

Long reinforces Zander's words:

...Xers need to be invited into a more intimate community almost immediately. Otherwise they will drift away. We need to establish an effective method of drawing Xers into an intimate community as soon as possible once they express interest in our church or Christian fellowship.⁶⁷

Because of their need for community, and because truth is processed through community, community becomes both the evangelistic door and the means of discipleship for Generation X. Thus, the salvation experience becomes a process rather than a crisis moment. Rick Richardson states, "It takes a lot longer to see students in this generation come to Christ. Rather than conversion happening in a day, it's more of an ongoing process where people get socialized into the faith."⁶⁸ Long helps our understanding by stating, "Past evangelistic efforts centered primarily on a 'point-in-time' conversion experience. In the postmodern world more people commit to Christ over a period of

⁶⁶ Zander, 39.

⁶⁷ Long, 156.

⁶⁸ Rick Richardson, quoted in Andres Tapia, "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," *Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994, 21.

time.”⁶⁹ Long calls this process a two-stage conversion in which a person becomes converted to the community and eventually converted to Christ.⁷⁰

It is important to note that Xers’ need and quest for community demands that the church places great emphasis on small group ministry. Postmoderns will not outgrow their need for community. A Gen X church must be a church of small groups and these groups must be relational, not programmatic.

Once the process of evangelism results in faith, the postmodern Gen Xer will not take on the characteristics of modernity. In reality, the tenets of postmodernism may be, in many respects, more closely aligned with biblical Christianity than are the tenets of modernity. Postmodernism’s emphases on community, relational authenticity, spiritual mystery, transcendence, and a holistic approach to life closely parallel the teachings and life-styles of the New Testament. Grenz states, “...closer inspection of the phenomenon [postmodernism] should convince us that we are in fundamental agreement with the postmodern rejection of the modern mind and its underlying Enlightenment epistemology.”⁷¹ Davis sums it up by saying, “It is important to remember that it is not our job to destroy postmodernism (which is a negative thing), but to construct a Biblical worldview (which is a positive thing).”⁷² Generation Xers may never denounce all of the characteristics of postmodernism, nor should we want them to.

However, there is one tenet of postmodern thought that will need to be dealt with in the discipleship process. Grenz states this discipleship issue by issuing this doctrinal

⁶⁹ Long, 209.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁷¹ Grenz, 165.

⁷² Davis, 2-65.

stance, “Our commitment to God revealed in Christ compels us to stand squarely against at least one aspect or outworking of the radical skepticism of postmodernism: the loss of a ‘center.’”⁷³ There is a center to the universe and that center is God. There are absolute truths that reveal that center and those truths are contained in the Bible. And there is a grand narrative that supersedes all other narratives and that narrative is the incarnational story of Jesus Christ. But in making such statements, we must heed the warning of Davis:

...don’t make a belief in absolute truth the litmus test of conversion. Postmodernism is a discipleship issue, not an evangelism issue...Salvation is not primarily faith in the sense of intellectual assent, it is faith in the sense of trust. The litmus test for conversion is this: does the student trust Jesus, and trust Jesus alone? If they do, He will work relativism out of them over time.⁷⁴

Making disciples of postmoderns is a journey, but it is a journey with a bright future because postmoderns make great Christians. Generation Xers are responders not mere talkers. Busters are extremely honest and want the church to be honest and straightforward with them. And, Xers are team-players, body ministry is part of their lifestyle.⁷⁵ What more could a pastor or church want from its membership?

Tying postmodern Gen Xers into the worshipping community will also involve an intentional refocusing for the traditional church. Once again, this is dangerous ground for the leadership of the church. Changing the worship style of a church can be a volatile process. However, Generation X simply does not respond to worship styles steeped in antiquity. Tex Sample states:

⁷³ Grenz, 164.

⁷⁴ Davis, 2-65.

⁷⁵ Zander, 2-79-89.

I really am “wired differently” from my children and grandchildren. What speaks to me does not speak to them. What moves me, entertains me, touches me is not what does so to them. People of my age will not engage younger generations until we recognize this otherness, and concede that along with images, sound and especially sound as beat are crucial to that recognition.⁷⁶

What are the elements that go into an effective postmodern worship experience?

It should be noted up front that for Xers, worship is a response to God and his Word.

Whereas preceding generations used worship as a time to prepare to hear from God, Gen Xers are more inclined to view worship as a response to what God has said.

Because postmoderns are immersed in a culture that places great importance on the senses, worship must be a very sensory experience. Long indicates that postmoderns need to feel what they see,⁷⁷ thus music with beat and vibration is important. Generation X is from a culture that celebrates dance and the arts. Sample says, “Dance as an indigenous practice in electronic culture is a major challenge to most churches today.”⁷⁸ But it is a challenge that must be faced if the church is to effectively minister to postmoderns. Tapia states, “Generation X...sees art as a primary vehicle for worship.”⁷⁹ Tim Wright adds, “A presentation-focused service...seeks to draw people into God’s story by connecting their story to the Gospel through drama, music, interviews, video clips, ‘on the street’ interviews, and so on - much like a good movie.”⁸⁰ The primary focus is to simply be culturally relevant. Wright continues:

To be truly engaging...worship will have an ‘indigenous vibe,’ meaning the language, musical styles, and ambiance of the service will grow out of

⁷⁶ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Cultures and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 42.

⁷⁷ Long, 113.

⁷⁸ Sample, 71.

⁷⁹ Tapia, 274

⁸⁰ Tim Wright, “Worship in the New Millennium,” *Strategies for Today’s Leader*, Spring 2000,

the local setting...The service will be real and authentic to the community.⁸¹

Because postmoderns are into spirituality and are not afraid to “feel” God, worship needs to celebrate both the mystery of God and the presence of God. Authentic worship experiences, for Gen Xers, should focus on music and other art forms that make them feel comfortable (forms and styles they are accustomed to in their everyday world) and cultural, relevant terminology that help draw them into the presence of God. Generation X is not so much into excellence as they are into authenticity. Churches that make worship “genuine” will touch the heart of this postmodern generation.

Just like postmodernism itself, postmodern worship is hard to define. John Hoyland, in an Internet article responding to the question of what constitutes postmodern worship, defines post modern worship as culturally relevant, participative, and community-based. Furthermore, postmodern worship proceeds without a ‘figurehead’ leader, it emphasizes the whole person in worship, and provides opportunity for both experience and understanding. Worship styles and modes are eclectic and can come from the past, present, and future. Postmodern worship makes little or no distinction between the “sacred” and the “secular,” it is willing to use ideas, forms, etc. from any source and is heavily oriented toward a multimedia experience. This type of worship is provisional (not perfect and willing to experiment), tolerant (accepts other forms of worship as valid), and local (contextual). Post modern worship is more attitudinal than adhering to specific forms.⁸² Obviously, this type of worship is not descriptive of the traditional worship

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John Hoyland, “Generation X Papers: Postmodern Worship - Some Musings,” <http://www.youth.com.za/xpaper2017.htm>, July 3, 2001.

existing in most denominational churches but it is the type of worship that will communicate to Generation X and other postmoderns.

The art of communicating the gospel is another challenge that postmodernism presents to those who wish to teach and train Generation X. Modernity's model of preaching/teaching is based on the Greek mindset of disseminating knowledge in a linear fashion. A lecture, based on a propositional truth text from scripture and resplendent with rational argument, is modernity's model of proper homiletics. Unfortunately, this model is ill-suited for communicating to the postmodern generations.

Three concepts seem to best characterize the art of preaching/teaching to postmoderns: the art of story-telling, the use of interactive and contemporary multimedia tools, and the willingness to be a model/mentor. We will discuss these in order.

Zander states, "To present a picture of Christ that busters can relate to, we need to rely on the power of story."⁸³ We must remember that a person's story is the one absolute that most postmoderns will agree to. What better way to communicate the gospel to the postmodern mind than telling the powerful story of God. Narrative, story telling, is how many people have learned for centuries. Most of the Bible, including the Gospels, is narrative. The idea that doctrine or truth can only be founded on the didactic or non-narrative portions of God's Word has never been valid and is certainly not an accepted notion today. Postmoderns will listen to a story, the key is to somehow connect their story with God's story.

⁸³ Zander, 40.

However, postmoderns want genuineness in the story. Xers must have, perhaps a better word would be demand, honesty and reality.⁸⁴ Zander states:

Postmoderns don't require nicely-wrapped-up endings. In fact, if it's too neat at the end, that discredits what you've talked about... There is a gut-level sense within them that life is too easy to summarize in a 30-minute message.⁸⁵

The story of God is full of mystery and seeming paradox. Whereas modernity demanded an explanation to the mystery and a resolution to the paradox, postmoderns are comfortable with both mystery and paradox. An honest admission by the communicator that he/she does not fully understand and struggles with the some of the concepts goes a long way toward establishing both the credibility of the messenger and the credibility of the message with postmoderns.

Of course, as Grenz points out, "As Christians, we claim to know what the grand narrative is. It is the story of God's action in history for the salvation of fallen humankind and the completion of God's intentions for creation. We boldly proclaim that the focus of this metanarrative is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who, we testify, is the incarnate Son, the second Person of the triune God."⁸⁶ But even this grand narrative is a mystery, as Paul points out in 1 Timothy 3:16 when he says, "...great is the mystery of godliness..." If we will simply tell the mysterious story of God's interaction with this world, and intersect the Gen Xer's story with that story, he/she will listen. Postmoderns are willing to consider the story of Jesus. It's not Jesus they have a problem with, its the way the church has represented him through deeds and actions.

⁸⁴ Long, 171.

⁸⁵ Dieter Zander, quoted in Jim Wilson, "In Sync," *Rev.*, September/October 2000, 76.

⁸⁶ Grenz, 164.

Postmodern preaching and teaching must be laced, however, with interactive and communicative multimedia tools. Generation X has been raised on the sights and sounds of the multimedia explosion. They will listen to a good story, but the story must be enhanced through sensory experiences. Long points out:

In the postmodern era, as can be seen in such diverse fields as quantum physics, MTV, and channel surfing, the linear method is no longer the primary method of study...For Xers Bible study needs to be more interactive and more free-flowing.⁸⁷

Sweet says:

Postmoderns learn more from electronic resources than from print. There is no option but to fully computerize the educational wing of your church, to install at least one screen in every sanctuary or worship center, to make Internet access easy and abundant.⁸⁸

Low-tech and postmoderns are at opposite ends of the spectrum. High-tech and interactivity is how Generation X learns best. Mike Slaughter and Kim Miller explain this concept:

The majority of this generation can do homework while watching television, listening to music through a headset, and checking their e-mail intermittently on the side—all while composing an English paper! The old method of how we thought people learned was to minimize the noise, yet we now see that [it is] to multiply the stimulation. We learn best with all our senses engaged. Next-level churches will understand that people are engaged through experience and environment—atmospheres of innovation—and they'll understand that the focus must be on engaging people through that environment.⁸⁹

After telling the story and accenting that story via multimedia means, the story must be validated by mentoring and modeling. Long states:

Modeling is becoming more crucial for Christian development. How do our ministries need to change to allow this modeling to take place?

⁸⁷ Long, 150.

⁸⁸ Sweet, 235.

⁸⁹ Mike Slaughter and Kim Miller, Class Notebook, 5-51.

Teaching that stresses cognitive learning, but does not also include relational learning, will be ineffective with this generation.⁹⁰

Zander concurs, “Large group meetings can build credibility with busters, but if relationships aren’t built outside of those settings, busters will not respond.”⁹¹ The teacher/preacher of the postmodern context must be willing to model the message through a life of openness and honesty. Superficiality is absolutely anathema to Generation X. Because this generation has been ignored and marginalized for so long, they must have someone to mentor them, to walk along side them, to genuinely show an interest in them.

The dynamic of postmodern communications may be the easiest change to assimilate into the life of an existing church. Our Greek-lecture hall type of approach seems to not be an effective tool for any generation today. Most people like a good story, are accustomed to receiving information through multimedia sensations, and desire to have someone walk along with them and show them the way.

The final area that churches must deal with if they are to effectively minister to and disciple postmodern people is in the area of involving postmoderns in outreach ministries. Zander cautions, “Busters will have a style of ministry different from that of boomers. To release them into ministry requires different strategies...Busters don’t want to talk; they want to respond.”⁹² Generation X tends to view its preceding generation as one that talked a good talk but failed to walk a good walk. With Generation X, however, once an evil is exposed or a need is revealed, action, not words, is their response. Churches need to be prepared to empower and support this type of response. Long

⁹⁰ Long, 79.

⁹¹ Zander, 39.

⁹² Zander, 41.

indicates that Xers resist control but respond to empowerment. They are values-driven, thus they want to undertake tasks that are meaningful. And, group ownership of the decision to act and the action itself are important to Xers.⁹³ Teams and teamwork are especially crucial to postmodern outreach ministry.

When it comes to ministry involvement, Generation X is not institutionally-oriented. Zander indicates that Xers are willing to give, but they give to ministry, not institutions.⁹⁴ Likewise, Generation X is as interested in the Great Commandment as the Great Commission. Shriver states, "...faith and social justice either go hand in hand or the church no longer pertains to younger people of faith who understand in their bones the horizontal nature of the gospel."⁹⁵ The church and its mission, for Generation X, is not institutionally-oriented but it must be relationally-oriented. Also, the church is to love as much as it preaches. For Generation X, faith and mercy go hand in hand.

Grenz states, "Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships."⁹⁶ Perhaps the traditional church, based on modernity, has much to learn from the church based on postmodernity.

Conclusion

Can the modern church reach the postmodern person? The answer is yes, but not without changing its methods of evangelism, discipleship, worship, teaching/preaching,

⁹³ Long, 154-56.

⁹⁴ Zander, 42.

⁹⁵ Shriver, 7.

⁹⁶ Grenz, 169.

and outreach ministries. Of course, once all of these methods change, the modern church will become, basically, a postmodern church.

Or, will the church actually become more of a premodern church. Craig Loscalzo quotes Tony Campolo as saying, “The church will be ready for postmodernity if it rediscovers the truth it had in premodernity...”⁹⁷ It appears that postmodernity is calling the church back to its biblical roots: community, holistic worship, spirituality that yearns for contact with the transcendent God, and compassion ministries that combine faith with works of love and service. The postmodern church may end up looking more biblical than the church based on modernity.

⁹⁷ Tony Campolo quoted in Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2000), 32.

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