

Christianity confronts postmodernism

Paul Kelm

Is your congregation's median age rising? Does your church have difficulty getting young adults to attend voters' meetings, serve on committees, and join traditional organizations? Are there fewer young people in worship?

We are told that young people are, well, young. They're getting rebellion against authority and rejection of their parents' lifestyle out of their system. They're discovering by experience that the truths and values their church taught them are true. Besides, they're really busy. But when they get married and have children, they'll come back to church just as others in the past.

Will they?

A recent explanation for the graying of the church explores differences in generations.

- "Builders," born before 1946, invested values in the church, values like loyalty to the traditions of the denomination, continuity and reverence in worship, fiscal and managerial conservatism.
- "Baby Boomers," known for questioning authority and "finding themselves" in a spiritual "journey," have demanded more programs and variety in the church. Their lifestyle doesn't accommodate long church meetings or commitments.
- "Generation X," born after 1964, has little interest in the church as institution. Young adults want "meaningful" worship and volunteer experiences. They value time more than money, and they're searching for a sense of family in smaller groups. Perhaps young people don't relate to our "church culture."

A deeper answer to the church's difficulty in reaching young adults is rooted in the dramatic change in western civilization. People today have a different set of assumptions about life. Most observers say we've entered a new era: "Postmodernism."

Postmodernism is a reaction to modernism. **Modernism was characterized by**

1. extreme rationalism, the denial of any theological or intuitive truth in favor of objective reasoning.

2. scientism, the conviction that the scientific method can explain everything and solve anything.

3. humanism, the exaltation of humankind to the role God once held as the center of life and the arbiter of truth and values.

A corollary of these tenets is optimism--a utopian confidence in unending progress and a better world.

Modernism is dead. Pure reason led to intellectual stalemate, as philosophies negated each other, and people opted for "what works" for them. The scientific discoveries of relativism and randomness exploded simple mathematical explanations for the universe. Besides, people lost faith in the ability of science to solve their problems and lost patience with a mechanistic view of life that robbed them of any meaning and mystery. A world war, threat of nuclear holocaust, new diseases like AIDS and Alzheimer's, and erosion of confidence in institutions like government and business destroyed the modern presumption of progress.

Modernism was no friend of Christianity. It favored secular society. Religion became a leap of faith because God was undemonstrable by science and unprovable by reason. The Bible was reduced to mythology. Heaven and hell became fictions of a repressive church bent on enforcing an archaic moral code. Darwinian evolution made a Creator unnecessary. Education replaced religion as the answer for social ills. And hope became a materialistic goal rather than an eternal expectation.

While some churches capitulated to modernism, "demythologizing" the Bible's miracles and offering a social gospel more "relevant" to a here-and-now culture, evangelical Christianity held its ground. But because modernism lived by objective reason, modern culture had a significant impact on the church. Some Christians retreated from the debate, leaving the impression that Christianity was anti-intellectual. Others engaged in dogmatic reasoning that made Christianity appear anti-emotional. The church ministers within its culture.

That culture has changed. Postmodernism is no friend of Christianity either. But we had better understand its impact on the people we serve and hope to reach. If we understand how our young members think and feel and approach life, we can better

involve them in the church's ministry. And if we are sensitive to the culture around us, we will discover new ways to reach new people with the timeless truth of the gospel.

Postmodernism is most readily recognized in politically correct

"multiculturalism." Acknowledging that no one culture is inherently superior is a healthy attitude. But underlying today's notion of multiculturalism is the conviction that religion is simply a part of culture and, therefore, no one religion is better than another. The 500th anniversary of the discovery of America, therefore, depicted Christopher Columbus as a villain who imposed his Christian culture on pristine native Americans who had a perfectly good animistic religion.

Philosophical pluralism argues that there is no one truth, only many truths. In fact, there is no objective point from which to argue a case for truth. In its unique context, each culture establishes its own truths.

Truth, then, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. No wonder that Jesus' claim, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (John 14:6) is viewed as intolerant bigotry.

Postmodernism rejects the possibility of one all-encompassing story that explains life--what the Bible claims to present. As a result, life cannot have any ultimate meaning, any sure hope, any real purpose. The curse of postmodernism is that, at best, life has been narrowed to the experience of one's own small circle, and at worst, life has been reduced to the cynical. In character then, America's youth dismiss conflicting viewpoints with "Whatever!"

Against this tide, Christianity offers the consistent explanation for life that is God's love. His special creation; his prophecies and miracles, culminating in the incarnation of his Son; his self-sacrificing redemption of the world; his assurance of eternal life--all these truths of Christianity extend hope to a generation estranged from hope.

Because postmodernism has rejected reason and objectivity as any explanation for life, young adults are typically not impressed with doctrinal arguments and historical claims to be "right." Postmodernism treats history as merely political or religious propaganda. What young people are looking for is a genuine experience of love.

The church must reintroduce its claim to objective and absolute truth in God's Word, but after it has introduced people to real and lasting love in God's Son. Objective truth is not discovered in science or arrived at by reason, as the modern world insisted. Rather, it is revealed by God through Jesus Christ and in Scripture.

To a postmodern world the church itself is the first evidence of its truth, when it lives out the power and love of that truth. "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another," Jesus said (John 13:35). To postmodernism the church presents its "softer side," love and hope, while to modernism the church presents hard-edged propositional truth.

Truth doesn't change to fit culture. But the way the church introduces people to the truth is affected by culture. We are naive if we fail to recognize the impact that two-plus centuries of modernism and western culture have had on the way we carry out our ministry. We will be frustrated if we fail to recognize the impact of postmodernism on the people today to whom Jesus has sent us.

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