TEACHING POSTMODERN PEOPLE
THEOLOGICAL TRUTH

By

Anthony R. Turner

A Thesis

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts, Theology

Charlotte, North Carolina
April, 2009

Master of Arts, Theology
Thesis Approval Sheet
Table of Contents

I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 8

II. The People .................................................................................................................. 10

III. The Problem ............................................................................................................. 27

IV. The Principles .......................................................................................................... 37

V. The Practices (How do we accomplish this in a postmodern world?) ................. 50

VI. The Objections ......................................................................................................... 70

VII. Conclusion-Native Americans and African Warriors ...................................... 74

Appendix A-Twelve signs of a discipling church ....................................................... 77

Appendix B-Dealing with change ................................................................................. 79
Introduction

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” ¹

“Nobody except the preacher comes to church desperately anxious to discover what happened to the Jebusites.”

Harry Fosdick²

The above Scripture is our guide for this work. We are reminded that the power the church can exhibit is found only in the Triune God. For a church to truly be able to answer this generation it is only through the transmission of the orthodox faith that has been faithfully passed down to us from past generations. We cannot be fooled into hollow and vain worldviews that many in this world would encourage the church to incorporate. It is not the purpose of the paper to redefine theology or create a new theology that is convenient for the world around us.

At the same time, we must recognize that while our life-giving message can never change, our methodology and our communication tools and techniques must always evolve. As a culture, we have boldly entered into the twenty-first century. People today are struggling with life and modern day issues and dilemmas. However, sadly, many of our churches are answering questions being asked seventy-five years ago. We must have a frank discussion, as a church family, about how we are doing being salt and light in our culture.

¹ Colossians 2:6-8 (New International Version)
While I definitely do not want to slide into an area of heresy, I do not want to become irrelevant to a world crying out for hope and answers to life and eternity. The truth is that we have those answers people are asking, but far too few churches are answering the questions in a way that is understood by our culture or even our own lay people. And we are perceived as irrelevant, uncaring and without truth to give to our world. The below quote is submitted to show the balancing act we must accomplish:

Paul was a visionary church-starting entrepreneur, who sacrificed dearly to dive into the mess of a culture foreign to him. . . . No longer can we afford to stand on the cliffs high above the cultural mudslide, chastising people for not climbing out of the mess to come up to higher ground. No longer can we feel content throwing our heroic lifelines of propositions intended to save. No longer can we sit by, bemoaning change and wishing to turn the clock back to nostalgic days gone by.

It is time for Christians, tethered to the lifeline of God’s Spirit and a community of faith, to gather up courage and plunge into the swirling mess of the cultural flow.³

To keep the above analogy, we must follow right behind our very God who dove into this sewer of life to redeem and restore His creation. Our priority within this life is to make disciples. This paper will examine how we can make disciples in this postmodern world.

Much work has been dedicated the last 5 years to understanding how the church should progress into the future of Postmodern America. However, there still remains a hold out among many pastors and church leadership to “go to war” with postmodern people, defeat them, change how they think and how they view the world around them. Only after that happens, the postmodern people can then be assimilated into the church, into our church. While our world is more and more postmodern, most churches remain

---

³ Burke, John. No Perfect People Allowed. (Barrington, IL: WillowCreek Resources, 2005), 20.
very modern in culture. As a result, we are seeing young adults leave the church in droves rather than conforming to the modern mindset of church leadership.

One will see that a postmodern worldview is no more unbiblical or anti-Christian than a modern worldview. In some ways, the postmodern context is more similar to the culture that existed during the age of the early church. This gives us hope that the body of Christ can flourish in such an atmosphere, just as it did in the age of Paul.

Also, it must be assumed that the writer comes from a Southern Baptist background and has been a teaching pastor for a emerging church plant; therefore, this work will focus a great deal on the priority of outreach and drawing the unchurched into the church and discipling those people. Also, the author considers discipling, growing and theological education to be all in the same arena if not describing the same process.

“The work of theology must happen in full community.”

This means that we must begin to think about our transmitting theology not in segmented approaches, such as in a confirmation class; but in more complete holistic approaches to the entire body of the church. We have to include the concepts and suppositions of the men who came before us, but if we simply accept the work of our forebears as the total conversation is to abdicate the hard work of thinking. This practice will turn theology into a impotent philosophy rather than an active pursuit of how we are to live God’s story in our culture.

This paper is by not means an attempt to diminish the importance of theology in our churches. Rather I have found that churches that are best positioned for the job of communicating theology and discipling next generations in the Postmodern age are those who make the practice of theology an essential element of their lives as the church body.

This is a challenge for our churches to be more involved in the work of theology as a

---

necessary part of spiritual formation and discipleship in the lives of the people of the church.

This work will detail exactly what the word Postmodern means. It will examine key concepts that the church must embrace and practice in order to effectively reach and disciple this tribe of people. Also, this work will answer some common objections that have been raised in the past for adopting alternative methods for communicating theological truth to a postmodern person. Finally, this thesis will show several examples of how current theologians and pastors are practicing these concepts in their real to life settings.
The People

We must focus on a couple of different types of people that could populate our pews today. For the church to continue to grow and to remain a vibrant organization that infuses grace, on a large scale to America, it is important to capture the heart and soul of what I call prevalent people groups. Without them coming, participating and more importantly incorporating God-honoring theology into their lives, the American church could move into a level of irrelevancy, such as what the church has slipped to in Western Europe over the past forty years.

For the last two hundred years we have been taught that our country is a melting pot. Recently, writers are calling our culture less of a melting pot and more of a salad bowl. By this I mean that many of our subcultures are less concerned about incorporating into the larger American culture, and instead wish to retain their unique customs and views, along with their language, religion and even politics.

Of all the subcultures, it is important for the church to capture the hearts and minds specifically of two types of people. These people represent a large cross section of the public. If the church would be successful in reaching these people, we would see a massive cultural shift within America. The two groups I contend that we must specifically reach are future generations and the dechurched and/or underchurched.

By future generations, I am speaking of children through young adults who have just entered marriage and are beginning to have children. The subject of the dechurched and under churched is more about attendance patterns and attitude towards church rather than age, place of residence or socio-economic status. The dechurched are those men and
women who grew up in a church and left for whatever reason to never return again. The underchurched are those who never or rarely grew up in a church and therefore will not even consider darkening the door of a faith community.

The ranks of future generations represent one of the greatest untapped potentials for future leadership. These young men and women are developing leadership skills and are beginning to take the reigns of leadership within their companies. Yet many churches have boards of leaders that are made up of the older generations.

Also, within the ranks of teenage students, we see a tremendous desire to engage and participate in spiritual communities. Current polls show that around “2/3 of all teens in America have some interaction with a church youth program in a typical month.” The barriers that teens have toward connecting to a church and developing a theological base are minimal. These teens listed learning credible insights about God and developing a practical theological framework for life as reasons for returning and committing to a faith community. And for the first time in decades we no longer have to give an apology to teens for taking a theological stance with secular friends and authorities. “Truly living the life of Christ earns the respect of modern teens.” However, just because these people attend church currently, there is no guarantee they will be in attendance in a generation.

And studies show a continuing lack of solidarity and commitment to local churches.

In recent polls conducted by George Barna’s research group approximately 12 million individuals are estimated as being in high risk for leaving the church within the next decade. Most of these people are reporting that they are leaving or are intending to

---

5 George Barna, Real Teens (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), 135.
6 Ibid., 136.
7 Ibid., 88.
8 George Barna, Grow Your Church from the Outside In (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 81.
leave the church due to hypocritical behavior within the church and because of a perceived irrelevancy found within the church. They cite a lack of clear teaching that deals with “practical everyday life” and note a lack of compelling leadership to challenge the to grow in their walk with God. These same people also show a poor level of Biblical and theological training. The giant question, to be answered below, is “does the church bare responsibility for this lack of training or do the individuals deserve the blame?”

Currently, the population of unchurched men and women in America is between 95 and 100 million. Barna says, “Being a Christian has lost much of its meaning in this age of relativism, tolerance, diversity, ecumenism and syncretism.” 9 While some pastors look at these unchurched as lost causes, these people hold great potential for kingdom growth and kingdom purpose. Most of these people tend to be competent and capable of meaningful interaction within small groups of believers.

We are clearly talking about well over 150 million people, when adding the unchurched, dechurched and future generations that currently attend church. These numbers are staggering and if we could mobilize these people for the kingdom of God, truly a cultural revolution would occur within America. These groups do vary greatly when defining them. However, there is worldview/philosophical preference that many of these people possess that brings forth a solidarity. Until recently the church, by and large has ignored this emerging worldview.

This worldview is called postmodernism. In the following pages, a treatment of the past worldview known as modernism will be shared. Also, a definition of postmodernism as well as a critique will be given. Finally, in this section will include with the question, “Is postmodernism all bad?”

9 Ibid., 21.
A new perspective has emerged within the world. This perspective states that there is no objective truth. Rather than the individuals trying to “get at the truth,” these people are trying to find “what works for them.” This perspective, or better yet, philosophy or worldview says that there are no standards or foundations for truth. They believe that all truth is relative to individuals and even cultures.

Noted scholar and author, Ron Nash has defined postmodernism as, “. . . a contemporary movement that rejects beliefs supposedly taught by thinkers during the Enlightenment and by followers of those ideas we know now as modernism.”¹⁰ I would disagree with Dr. Nash in defining postmodernism as a “movement.” A movement usually describes a subsection of people, a strata or small band. The postmodern worldview is not a movement that is highly limited in scope. Rather it is a philosophy that has subverted all major areas of thought and philosophy within modern culture. Also, it is borderless. The postmodern worldview is not only found in America, but throughout all the world. Though, one should note that Western Europe and the United States of America certainly are the strongholds of this worldview.

Dr. Nash also takes to task the concept of this being a current trend. In his book, *Life’s Ultimate Questions*, he writes on the life of Hume. He argued that Hume had a classic “postmodern” outlook on life; yet he lived in the 1700’s during the beginning of the Enlightenment.¹¹ This point is addressed below.

A new worldview has emerged, this outlook goes above and beyond all other worldviews. This worldview is called postmodernism. It casts doubt upon notions that modern scholars would hold dear. Notions such as: truth, language, reality and

---

¹¹ Ibid., 256.
knowledge. At the core of its teaching absolute truth, once a viable concept, has turned into an urban legend.

Who would ever question the scientific truth such as the size of the land mass of Africa or that the law of non-contradiction is a fundamental rule for debate and logic? Or who would second guess George Washington was the first President of the United States of America, or that \(1+1 = 2\)? The answer to the above question is that more people today question, what we would consider as objective truth, than ever before. These people say that these “facts” might be true for some, but certainly not for all. This change in logic and thinking is what we note as a seismic shift in thought, a shift in worldview; our world is witnessing a shift from the Modern to the Postmodern.

To thoroughly understand the postmodern, we must rewind Human History several hundred years. A shift in worldview and cultural philosophy is nothing new. Western culture has gone through several shifts in worldview.

One worldview follows another. In the eighteenth century the Enlightenment challenged the Biblical Synthesis that had dominated Western Culture. With the nineteenth century came both Romanticism and Scientific materialism. The twentieth century has given us Marxism and fascism, positivism and existentialism.  

And we could continue to document changing thought processes. However, to get a better understanding of postmodernism, we need to examine the Modern Age.

In intellectual history, the birth of the “Modern” period was born from the Enlightenment. Thomas Oden dates this period as beginning with the French Revolution in 1789 and ending with the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.  

---

the Enlightenment did not totally reject belief and faith in God. However, they did subject the concept of God to a distant view of transcendence. These thinkers were titled “Deists”; for they thought that if God did exist, surely he was neither concerned with the affairs of creation nor human history. These Deists replaced faith and theology with reason and science. Mankind’s only hope lay in study and scientific application. Out of this worldview various philosophical outlooks emerged; included are Secular Humanism and Positivism.

Now rational humankind no longer needed to trust in anything beyond logic and sense perception. As a result, the supernatural, Jesus’ Incarnation and his Resurrection were rejected as superstition. The Modernist sought to critique the Scriptures and free it from all fantasy. Diogenes Allen notes:

In time some went so far as to claim that the Bible was not needed at all. It was useful to the human race in its infancy. But now that we have achieved enlightenment, we can read the book of nature and avoid all the blemishes, distortions, and absurdities that are found in the Bible.14

In time, this “sterilized” theology removed God from the stage and attempt to create a democratic social order that would prize social progress and esteem reason.

Modernity did not create the wonderful utopia it originally hoped for. The following two hundred years brought in a world wide slave trade, two world wars that devastated much of the planet, communism, and threat of nuclear annihilation. In the last twenty-five years people began to second guess the idea that a pursuit of reason, science and technology could create a better world and an evolution of humankind. Recently, scholars even question the orderliness of science and the natural world. Many philosophers and thinkers have began reinterpreting the “laws of logic” and modern texts

---

that have been considered beyond doubt. The modernists promise of liberation turned into chains of oppression, giving rise to empires that led to mass suffering. This has been coined as the “dialectic of the Enlightenment.”

One note to make, just as postmodernism dominates the landscape today, but is not universally embraced by all scholars, scientists, writers, philosophers and thinkers; so in the same way not all individuals embraced the modern approach. Modernity would have its dissenters and they would sow the seeds of postmodernity.

Hume would be considered, as noted earlier by Dr. Nash, as a forerunner to postmodernity. Also, Kant, would reject pure rationalism and the empirical method found in the Enlightenment. Instead, he would focus upon human imagination and the transcendental world. The movement known as Existentialism was perhaps one of the strongest and most influential reactions to modernism. In this meaning was called into question. Reason would not be a guide and the natural world was not ordered. This would be a forerunner to postmodern thinking.

At this point, we must discuss the difference between postmodern and postmodernism. Postmodern is used to define a period of time that most historians and authors would recognize. However, postmodernism describes a distinct worldview and/or philosophical system. Gene Veith describes it in this manner, “If the modern era is over, we are all postmodern, even though we reject the tenets of postmodernism.”

Even though the philosophical system for postmodernism was being developed as long ago as the time of Hume, Stephen Connor writes, “the concept of postmodernism

---

16 Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 42.
cannot be said to have crystallized until about the mid-1970’s…”\textsuperscript{17} For this reason, we have not heard this phrase postmodernism or postmodern until the mid nineties. And only the last decade has the church given serious discussion and study toward this worldview.

So how would one define the term postmodernism? How does one describe the immense worldview known as postmodernism? It is complex and clearly ambiguous. For the purpose of this writing, we will cover postmodernism with very broad strokes. (For a more in depth look at postmodernism, I would commend the work \textit{Postmodern Times} by Gene E. Veith, Jr.) In general, postmodernism is an assault on truth, a confusion of knowledge, a redefining of reality, a blending of the languages and a developing of new tribalism.

Postmodernism categorically denies universal truth. Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the most influential postmodern writers, describes it as an “incredulity towards metanarratives.”\textsuperscript{18} A metanarrative is any large story that large groups of people, even entire societies embrace as truth. Patricia Waugh defines metanarratives as, “Large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application.”\textsuperscript{19} The faith story of the death and Resurrection of Christ is considered a metanarrative. Another example would be the concept of liberty and justice for all and the story of the founding of America. Truth found in metanarratives is not true, according to the postmodernist, for all of society. This is not only an attack on truth, but on coherence of facts that have been considered to be true until the Postmodern age. It is the postmodernists responsibility, so


they think, to find every metanarrative and deconstruct it, flatten it out, and bring all metanarratives to the same level. Their goal is to make every particular approach, or metanarrative, to be no more true than any other. From their point of view, what defines truth is relative to the individual or tribe holding the idea close to heart.

Out of this practice there is no absolute truth, values or even ethics in order to call upon or draw from. Instead of working diligently to create new order, a new system of thinking; postmodernists work to deconstruct all things that are held dear by society.

Such an approach makes intellectual inquiry and the communication of learning and meaning so difficult that its appeal is usually limited to a small circle; many simply give up seeking truth. No longer sure of the truths of even the natural sciences, postmodern Western man sees everything as dependent on his own understanding and interpretation of reality.  

Jacques Derrida is one postmodern thinker who actively challenged the concept of objective meaning within society or should I say societies. These postmodernists would not argue that these metanarratives have no meaning, but that the meaning relies upon the perspective and understanding of the individual.

To take this philosophy to the relation of the church and culture Brown cites Pitirim Sorokin writing, “From the point of view of sensory truth, the Christian truth of faith, revelation, and God–indeed, the whole Christian religion and movement–could not appear other than absurdity and superstition.” With this in mind the postmodern rejects ultimate truth in particular and cultural truth in general. As a result, just as the postmodernist goes to war with the assertions of the modernist; so they also war with the Christian culture, which make truth statements about life and eternity. The postmodernist

21 Ibid., 56.
will assert that just like in society there is not absolute truth, so within the church there is no subject or ultimate truth.

In working to remove the possibility of any ultimate truth, postmodernists meld the person seeking knowledge and the product of knowledge. In other words, the postmodernist develops a cosmic confusion of knowledge. Humankind will not sit back and receive knowledge from the world passively. Our society will receive this knowledge through filters developed through perception and society, and even through societal interpretation; thus resulting in a confusion of knowledge in cosmic proportions. This cosmic confusion has earned the title of nihilism and relativism. (We should note that these terms are not exclusive to postmodernist. However, postmodernists have lived this philosophy out to a greater extent than many other philosophies.) Therefore, the disciplines of logic, history, science, and the construct of morality are not universal, complete and absolute; they are the developments of our own experience and interpretation of experience.

Why do postmodernists hold these views? Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” states that the mind “brings something to the objects it experiences . . . The mind imposes its way of knowing upon its objects.” Based on this understanding, it would seem that reality is what we perceive it to be. There is no rational thought that makes up the knowledge society possesses. As with truth and metanarratives, it is dependent upon the individual or the individual culture to define this knowledge.

When combining truth and knowledge in this postmodern matrix, the postmodernist will assert that reality is practically unknowable. The only thing that truly

---

can be known is our individual experience and our individual interpretation of that experience. Therefore, based upon this it can be concluded that man cannot experience reality in any absolute sense. Another way to state this concept, is that humanity only will experience subjective reality, we can never know objective reality, so says the postmodernist. All one will possess is her own finite, limited perception and experience. All of the disciplines and philosophies are a reflection of human subjectivity to sense perception.

As demonstrated above, the postmodernist rejects rationalism and empirical methodology; with truth under assault, knowledge being unknowable, and reality being questioned they will focus upon human experience. This will ultimately center on human communication through the use of language. Through this though, we see a downward spiral, as we realize human experience is interpreted subjectively. Therefore, the postmodernist has a limited degree of confidence even in the use of language, since this is based on human understanding and experience which is flawed at best, according to postmodernism.

Within the language experience, the postmodernist will concentrate on the idea of the metaphor. For example, instead of viewing history as objective truth; it is a series of metaphors. The reason for this is because the historian recorded those events using his perceptions and interpretations. Another person recording those events might see a different focus to record within the history books.

As such, we also see that the issue of morality is subject to the issue of metaphor within language for the postmodern thinker. They see that one culture or one individual’s view and expression of morality is just as relevant and correct as the next culture’s
expression of morality. From this thinking comes the concept of “Multiculturalism” and/or “Political Correctness.” Rather than agreeing with one specific morality as absolute, every person’s moral direction is to be respected and affirmed regardless of its consequences. From this language must be revised in order to not favor any one moral code and ultimately offend another individual or tribe.

By developing these individual and even societal moral mores and codes, small tribal groups form within the greater society. One of the central figures of the postmodern worldview, Freidrich Nietzsche, believed that life is absurd. There is no truth, no value, and no reality. He taught that all that was left is “The Will to Power,”23 This is more than a will to survive or a will to overcome. It is an inner drive to express a vigorous affirmation of humanities faculties. This is ultimately expressed by overcoming the oppression of others. A band of rebels defending their fortification against the Roman Empire holds the same appeal as a counterculture movement such as a homosexual organization fighting for their “right” to marry.

As the individual communicates their will to power, the individual will bond with others to form postmodern tribes. “Society is splintering into hundreds of subcultures and designer cults, each with its own language, code and life-style.”24 Anecdotally, we can see this displayed simply by walking down the halls of any American high school. There was a day in which every student wanted to be the quarterback on the football team or the head cheer leader. And all of these students would put these kind of archetypes into student government positions and into the home coming court. However, currently there is not a singular society within the high school sub-culture. Today our high schools

are people with various tribes: Goths, punks, burnouts, geeks, band nerds, motor heads, jocks, these are but a few of the tribes represented within the halls of every high school.

Certainly, postmodern people are correct in that logic, science and ethics are not beyond questioning and require man to passively “fall in line” with. However, these postmodernist’s are not only challenging society to question the metanarratives of our society; they are dismissing all of the thoughts and ideas that came from modernity. Clearly they have taken this idea far too far.

The postmodernist naturally takes a nihilist view of life and truth by rejecting all the foundations of “normal” society. Is this not a position that is beyond question? How can we measure the claims of the postmodern worldview and deem them to be true? Even though the postmodernists attempt to “deconstruct” all metanarratives of culture; yet they are attempting to develop their own metanarrative.

What if some member of the heteromorphous group insists that Lyotard prove his claims to the satisfaction of the members of the group? And what if the members of that group refuse to admit the reasonableness of Lyotard’s claim and treat it as a “paralogical” metanarrative?25

While the postmodernist believes the modern view of truth is incorrect; the postmodernist has to assume their nihilist views are equally correct.

Also, if all language is subjective and totally dependent upon the hearer for evaluation; then why do postmodernists write such a large volume of books? Also, why have these scholars not found a method of communication more reliable than language? Ultimately, language becomes a jail not only for the modernist, but also the postmodernist. How can the postmodernist author be assured that the reader is truly

25 James F. Harris, Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1992), 118.
understanding of what is trying to be communicated? What, in effect, is happening is
deconstruction is being deconstructed.

In attempting to create a multicultural society through a new tribalism, the
postmodernist is actively opposing many groups that it finds inconvenient to merge and
co-exist with others. Now in an attempt to raise up the tribe of homosexuals, the
postmodernist is leveling their cannons at the tribe of conservative Christianity.
Somewhere within this matrix, one or a “group of ones’ determine which tribe will be
exalted and which ones will be attacked and ultimately destroyed.

One tool for doing this is rewriting history:

Those who celebrate the achievements of Western civilization are accused of narrow
minded “Euro-centrism;” this view is challenged by “Afro-centrism,” which exalts
Africa as the pinnacle of civilization. Male-dominant thought is replaced by feminist
models. . . . Christianity is challenged and replaced with matriarchal religions; the
influence of the Bible is countered by the influence of goddess-worship.26

Whether, the history and achievement of Western Europe or East Angola are true or not;
that is irrelevant. For the postmodernist would consider the truth impossible to know.
We find that accuracy is rather irrelevant. Truth and accurate reporting of facts are not
what the postmodernist is after; their goal is to attain power.

Another critique of postmodernism is the confusion over morality. The irony of
the matter is that this postmodernism rejects morality, as a whole, yet it will affirm their
need for power. It sees oppression by any group as a morally bad thing. However, is this
not an ethical judgment? In effect, to live the belief that all morality is bad would create
a cosmic void within the soul of any and all cultures and postmodern tribes. To say that
one should not impose their standards of sex upon anyone would argue that we must look

26 Veith, Postmodern Times, 57.
upon a pedophile without disdain. However, if one would approve of the pedophile’s behavior, then this person is again creating a morality, although incongruent with rational society. In and of itself, the postmodern view of morality is unsustainable and incongruent with its own thought.

In effect, everyone is so disconnected and convinced that their way of looking at life is correct for them; this leaves no room for discourse or ability to understand differences between groups. Ultimately, postmodernism implodes upon itself and will leave a true postmodern to see fallacy in thought and will cause a searching for reason that can stand scrutiny from others.

Before we leave this topic of postmodernism, we should ask the question, ‘Is all of Postmodernism bad?’ Or “should we totally fear postmodern thought?” Should the church be prepared to fall into irrelevancy in the postmodern world?

Allen writes:

A intellectual revolution is taking place that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages . . .The principles forged during the Enlightenment . . . which formed the foundations of the modern mentality, are crumbling 27

For the first time in several hundred years, Christianity is intellectually relevant in a postmodern world. “The postmodern age has room for Christianity in ways that modernism did not. Its openness to the past, its rejection of narrow rationalism…these insights are useful to the recovery of the Christian worldview.” 28

During the Enlightenment and in a Modern worldview, the supernatural was viewed with a great

27 Diogenes Allen, Christian Belief in a Postmodern World, 2.

28 Veith, Postmodern Times, 119.
amount of skepticism and doubt. However, with the death of absolute human reason and science, human reason is open for consideration.

Also, we must not turn up our nose at postmodern thought. Despite the gaping holes within postmodern logic and philosophy, we can learn some important lessons from this thinking and we can revamp our methodology for communicating truth to a postmodern culture. For example, postmodernism reminds us of our limitedness and lack of knowledge. We often are guilty of believing we were the masters of our own faith. The postmodern outlook reminds us that we do not yield the power we think we possess. Veith argues, “Postmodernism may represent the dead end—the implosion, the deconstruction—of attempts to do without God.”

Postmodernism also challenges our theology to reengage in old dialogues, to review past arguments to make sure we do not settle for hashed out arguments, without first engaging with our minds and rationale. It shows us that theology is not exhaustive and there still remains much that we are to wrestle.

Also, when the church is truly being a New Testament church there is a level of a multicultural experience within the church. As was noted earlier, this is a huge value within the postmodern worldview. Veith says:

The church is in fact the world’s most “multicultural” institution, extending throughout time and throughout the world, both unified and diverse.

John records in Revelation 7:9, “A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the lamb.”

29 Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 68.
30 Ibid., 156
31 Rev. 7:9 (New International Version)
Truly the heart of God is to create multicultural community within His Kingdom. It is God’s sovereign decree that all of His creation is represented within the Kingdom.

To sum it up, postmodernism does not need to be viewed as our mortal enemy. Veith even writes, “If the modern age is really over, Christians have every reason to be glad.”\textsuperscript{32} In many ways postmodern thought helps us to abandon many of our foundations that we place our faith in other than God. It can remind us that the only true foundation is found in God alone. Postmodernism reminds us that all people have some kind of bias and no one is truly “tabula rasa”. We must accept and take in the elements of postmodernism that help us on our journey of growing and reject the extremes of Derrida and Neitszche.

\textsuperscript{32} Veith, \textit{Postmodern Times}, 19.
The Problem

“Europe and the United States have degenerated into Christian graveyards. The stench is overwhelming. Crime, immorality, sexual disease, and drug abuse run rampant. Christian values are but faint memories. This is what happens when Christians try to escape, rather than fulfill their responsibilities in the world.”

Dr. Nash gives us a very dire outlook for the church today within American culture. How did the church get here? What events drove our culture into this position? To answer these questions, we must realize a couple of ideas. First, our culture did not slide into this position, described by Dr. Nash, over night. Also, the church has not remained pure and detached through this moral slide. Rather, she has participated within the culture just as readily as the unchurched. What caused the church to slide? How have we and past generations failed to teach the church to remain pure amidst this moral slide our culture has experienced and is experiencing?

It is important to note the ground we have covered in transmitting theological truth to the church. There have been at least three major modes of passing theology down the line. “From the earliest days in America, spiritual growth consisted of going to church and practicing spiritual disciplines. The first attempt to improve on this model was the addition of Sunday School.” The original notion for Sunday School was to enlist children who did not have strong homes and parental figures within the burgeoning inner cities during the Industrial Revolution of America. The core of the class was ultimately relationship between the teachers and the children. However, over time, it was expected that all should be involved within Sunday School in order to accomplish the task for

---

34 Nick Taylor. “Fourth wave Formation” Rev. (vol. 4, No 6, Aug. 2001), 44.
spiritual growth and theological education. This methodology was a poor tool for taking the knowledge it imparted and making application within the student’s daily life. In most classes, “students were passively engaged and dependent on the teacher.”

The next major wave of transferring theological truth was the one to one model championed by The Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ. This model was quite successful among students within the college campus. However, within the church it was difficult for effective implementation, due to limited resources and limited man-power. Also, this discipleship process would only last for a set time and ultimately end, unless the participant chose to begin coaching others through the process, but the material was never the less completed. For those who opt out, there would rarely be another place to turn to for additional training and growth.

The small group wave followed the second wave. “Small groups allow more people to get involved and encourage fringe Christians to forge stronger bonds with a believing community.” The problem with this methodology is that unlike Sunday School, there is an emphasis for every day living out of practical theology. However, most small group leaders have difficulty transferring Biblical-theological principles to the members of their small group. This marked a shift in theological thinking within the rank and file of the church.

Many will point to the degradation of absolute truth as the foundation for the decay within and without the church. “Less than half of all born again adults are convinced that there is absolute truth, 44% to be exact.” Before the church can debate and teach the finer points of theology, we must have a strong grasp on the concept of

35 Ibid., 46.
36 Ibid., 48
absolute truth. Discussing the nature of God falls on deaf ears when the participants refuse to trust in truth that does not fail.

Some of the most current statistics are very alarming as far as what the average church member believes and considers as true. For instance, 37% of church members believe Jesus committed sins while on earth. 40% of Christians believe Jesus did not rise from the dead after the crucifixion. As far as areas of sin, the church does not fair much better. 51% of the church believes that if a person does enough good works he can earn his way to heaven. Also, 57% of church members believe that Satan is not a true, living being, but simply a symbol of evil.38 These statistics show that huge numbers of Christians and church goers, in some cases even majorities hold theological beliefs that are exactly opposite of what the Bible teaches.

These theological beliefs ultimately drive how the church views other societal and life issues. For instance, 51% of self identified Christians within Barna’s research identify money as the main symbol of success in life. One third of the church identified freedom as being able to do anything a person wants to do. And a quarter of people within the church think that whatever works best for the individual is what should be defined as good for that person. Another disturbing statistic, 53% of Christians believe the goal for life is personal fulfillment and enjoyment.39

To say the least, people no longer read nor are they students of the Bible any longer. Within many churches today consumerism vies for the attention of the leadership. “Within the American church Oprah, Dr. Oz and Simon Cowell are more

38 The above statistics are taken from Barna Growing True Disciples, 55, 56.
39 Ibid., 65, 66.
In addition to these statistics Willow Creek Church has recently conducted a survey among several hundred mainstream churches the past five years and found that some 25% of church members would classify themselves as spiritually stalled or dissatisfied members. Common statements among these people are “I believe in Christ, but I haven’t grown lately.” Or “My faith is central and I am trying to grow, but my church is letting me down.” It is no wonder that our society has quit viewing the church as the salt and the light that Jesus has exhorted us to be. We have churches filled with error among the laity and even the clergy and the church is failing to capture the attention of not just the world, but its own members and we are failing to capture not just their minds, but their hearts, imaginations, passions and efforts.

If this is a snapshot of the people within the average American church, what is the make up of the pool of people that could potentially turn to the church? There are a number of sources from which the church could draw. Of these pools, two specific groups are very deep and provide a great opportunity for our churches to create great momentum for the kingdom. These two groups are future generations (teen culture) and a group called born again unchurched people.

Within our current teen culture, there is a deep hunger for spirituality and connection with the deeper things in life. Current statistics suggest that two out of three teens are interested in a meaningful walk with the living God. This is the positive element. Also, it is a seismic shift within our culture. Even as few as twenty years ago, teens who participated within a church experienced high degrees of peer pressure and ridicule. Today, students who do not have a hungering for spiritual things are considered

---

41 Greg Hawkins. *Reveal: Where are You?* (Barrington, IL: WillowCreek Resources, 2007), 47.
the outsider or the different person. Today, there is big commercial appeal for spiritual items. In the present day, clothing with spiritual themes are a hallmark of American clothiers.

The good news is that teens are extremely open to spirituality. The bad news is that only one third of these spiritually open students are prepared to be engaged in a Christian church. Why is this? It seems our next generation sees the church as adding to their life in inconsistent ways. Nor is the church important enough to justify a deep commitment that would cost time and resources, according to these students. Barna writes, “If they are going to find God they can find Him elsewhere.”

Or so they believe.

Also, it seems there are those students who are currently attending church; who have not had their hearts and attention captured. Barna has found, through his research, that only one out of three teens currently attending church plan to do so after they leave home. Within the next five to seven years, the church has the potential to see even a more dramatic decrease in attendance within the college through young married ages.

Barna has also identified another population of people who already agree with most of the church’s presuppositions. According to Barna this group is at least 12 million strong within America. These people are the born again unchurched. These are people who have embraced some of our conservative, evangelical Christian theology; yet for one reason or another have left the church and chances are they are not interested in returning because they feel the church by and large is irrelevant.

---

43 Ibid., 136.
Even though this group has embraced much of the church’s evangelical theology, there are distinct differences with this people group. For instance, one third of these people believe the Bible is filled with errors. This belief is due to the fact that 75% of this group own a family Bible, but 60% of these Bibles are King James Version Bibles.\textsuperscript{45} Although our parents grew up with this translation, most of the current generation find this translation difficult to understand and comprehend, opening up the possibility of misinterpretation.

There are specific and great challenges present in order for the church to draw these people groups. Chuck Colson wrote, “The typical person has become resistant to the Christian faith and it raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the traditional methodology of our present church age.”\textsuperscript{46} However, it is not impossible to reach them and then develop them into fully functioning followers of Christ. It is Barna’s belief that if we do the right things in developing these people and rethink how we train, teach and coach these people we could, “ring the bells of millions of these wayward families.”\textsuperscript{47}

Below I will address the specific ideas and actions that the church must take in order to not only draw these people into the fellowship, but also to help those already attending to develop a fully functioning theological framework from which to live out their lives. However, before we come to this point, we must specifically address several specific problems that are within the church itself.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{46} Chuck Colson. “Reaching the Pagan Mind” in Christianity Today (9, Nov. 1992), 112.
\textsuperscript{47} Barna. Grow your Church from the Outside In, 81.
Dr. Ed Stetzer wrote, “The North American church is deeply rooted in modernity.”

This statement supports the concept in many forward thinking people that many of our churches are living out of a culture that is 30 to 40 years behind our current time. This mindset of keeping the tradition of our childhood is relatively harmless in and of itself. However, it is fatal when we are attempting to show the relevance of the gospel to a media savvy and contemporary society.

“The postmodern’s heavy diet of mass media, combined with an uncritical embrace of computer technologies and the national shift in morals and values has resulted in an entirely new filter through which Americans receive and interpret information….the mere emergence of the new filter mandates a new style of sermon, lesson development and delivery.”

In many church across America, a great deal of advancement has occurred in contemporizing the worship experience. However, little has been done to create and advance more contemporary experiences within the teaching and preaching of theological truth within these churches. Mark Miller wrote, “The teaching and educating of the flock has remained largely unchanged for centuries.”

For this reason, we will experience a worship service where electric instruments are present, there is the use of power point and over head projectors. Some churches will even use drama and video images to add to the worship experience; but when the proclaiming of the word comes and the teaching of truth, it is the same experience from the past 400 years. A pastor ascends to the pulpit, opens his Bible and begins reading the Word. Then explaining or giving commentary of that passage of Scripture. This is but one example of showing how, even though our

49 Andrew Carreage. *eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation.* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publication, 2001), 64.
message is far from irrelevant, this society has experienced our methodology as irrelevant to their souls, hearts and minds.

For the past sixty years within the Southern Baptist convention, our score board for success of a church has been how many people attend, how large is our budget and building and how many are baptized in a given year. I argue that this score board is wrong for this culture. While all of the above mentioned factors are good things or at least morally neutral, reaching and growing people today will not necessarily factor into these items that can be easily measured. Within these former factors, the church developed programs to aid in growing and adding points to the scoreboard. By doing this the church has been inadvertently promoting programs rather than people. In a current culture that idealizes individuals and individual rights, a church that focuses on program driven ministry will falter.

Also, on this scoreboard, we have identified as success, people working their way through specific discipleship programs to attain head knowledge over Scripture and theology. However, this type of program makes a person smarter, but it does not go far enough to develop complete and total transformation within the person’s life. The world might experience church members who have access to more Bible teaching and theological training, but there is little to no transformation within the believer’s life.

All of the above issues have culminated to create another issue within the church. This issue is a deepening institutionalism that lacks life changing power and real authority. “In postmodern culture there is no room for a second hand God.”51 People today do not want stories about how God can save and transform lives, they want to

---

experience the miraculous and the holy as is experienced within the Scriptures that we are teaching. By institutionalizing the church and theology, we now have teachers that do not teach from the power and holiness of God. Many of our teachers communicate theological truth not with authority or power, but as an outside entity that can teach but remain untouched by this life giving truth found in Scripture. In the worst case scenario, found in too many of our churches today, theological truth is no longer about life and death issues, but secondary matters that will not carry over into every day life.

As a result of this, “most believers say that their faith matters, but few are investing much energy in the pursuit of spiritual growth.” So we are beginning to see the effect of more and more churchmen becomingbiblically and theologically illiterate in a society that embraces knowledge. This effect simply does not make sense to a rational mind. We live in a day and age in which more and more tools exist for spiritual and theological education. We have some of the best communicators and communication tools the world has ever known. However, the church person, statistically speaking, is spending less time and effort in growing and developing their theological framework and living from that source. Christian Schwarz stated, “A church, regardless of how orthodox its dogma, can hardly expect to experience growth, as long as its members do not learn to live their faith with contagious enthusiasm and to share it with others.”

Perhaps the above statement is the beginning of the solution. There is no doubt that the church is at a crossroads. We must determine how we will continue to carry on the Truth of God’s Word and how we shall teach and educate our church people from God’s Word. Our people must not only embrace a Biblically correct theological

---

framework; but we must also radically live this framework out. What are the principles the church must enfold within their ministries? And what are some of the actual practices that forward-thinking, progressive churches are enacting currently? Read on for these questions to be answered.
The Principles

“Postmodernity is the single most powerful force shaping the mindset, attitudes and values of this generation…if we want to understand and minister to this generation, postmodernity is our starting point because the way future generations will look at and process truth will change the way we communicate and reason with people. Old styles of teaching our theology are replaced by new approaches to telling the old, old story.”54

As we shift from talking about the changing people and the state of many churches, it is only proper to realize that we cannot teach our theology in the same manner as we have for past generations. Some would argue that theological communication is no longer needed and not as vital as it was in past generations. However, I have found that, “Theology in the postmodern church is more important not less.”55 In a world that is redefining and editing all knowledge around us and second guessing all of the truths we have held dear; it is vital for the church to dig deeper and go farther into our theological base than we have in previous generations.

The final sentence of the first citation is poignant. We are not in the business of throwing out our orthodox, conservative theology that is based upon Scripture. Rather, we must approach the task of life change and theological communication with both humility and boldness. We approach with humility because any church, theologian or pastor who insists on having a total theological system that is synonymous with the heart of God should be cautious. “The idea that everybody else approaches the Bible and

theology with baggage, agendas and lenses and I don’t is the ultimate in arrogance.”

Even though there is a bed rock of theology upon which we base our lives and churches upon, we must still wrestle with our faith and ask some of the same questions our forefathers raised in order to be sure we are not approaching God’s Word with baggage and outside agendas. We do this with boldness; just like Captain Kirk and the U.S.S. Enterprise we “go boldly where no man has gone before.” While we are not creating new theology for a new day; we are learning to express our theology in radically different ways and methods. “We can and should be reforming how we teach and communicate the truth of God; we must raise new questions about theology, service and love that are fitting for our world and time.”

This section will identify key areas and attitudes that the church must shift into in order to continue being salt and light effectively to our culture. As mentioned above, we must change the score board for measuring success. In this section, we will look at exactly what needs to be done to change this score board. Also, this section will examine what a church that goes deep into theology for their congregation looks like. This is called a discipling church. Finally, this section will challenge every church desiring to communicate theology to this postmodern world to emerge into the emerging culture.

Steve Sjogren says, “We can choose to do battle in the two different arenas. We can try to convince others in the arena of the mind or we can approach people in the arena of the heart.” In the past, pastors, thinkers and theologians have entered the battle for the soul, almost exclusively, through the arena of the mind. What Pastor Sjogren

---

implores is for the church to begin working towards life transformation and spiritual growth by entering the battle with the heart. This approach has been discouraged because so many believe that to use and have a faith base seated within the emotions is a dangerous proposition. However, we must recognize that it is equally dangerous to develop a system of theology that is rational and integrates well within the mind, but leaves the heart cold and the emotions passionless.

Not only must we consider moving away from working towards convincing the mind, but we must also devalue the primacy of logic within our teaching and preaching. “Logic is a loser. They (postmoderns) do not respond well to intellectual apologetics. A Postmodern will say, ‘Let me see it with your life before you tell me with your words.”’\(^{59}\)

There is still a desperate place for apologetics in our postmodern culture. However, we cannot lead with this tool as we have for the last four hundred years.

The final area we must move from is, for lack of better terms, a God-centered theology. By this I do not mean that we must move from the idea that God is the center of our focus. Nor should we step away from the idea that all things happen for the glory of God. What I am saying, is that a theological manual that spends much of its energy and effort explaining characteristics of God and principals of His work that have little practical relevance within our culture, and yet spends little effort dealing with postmoderns’ actual questions is a theology that will leave future generations cold to what the church is trying to communicate. “God centered theology that fails to give serious attention to human beings is not God centered at all.”\(^{60}\) This makes sense;


humankind is the greatest expression of God’s passion and the capstone of God’s creation effort.

So if we are to leave the head, logic and deity focused theology behind us to draw future generations into the church and to accurately teach and develop the heart of God into these people, how do we perform that task? We move from the head into the heart. We move from the individuality of logical debate, me verses you, and we move into a discussion with a goal of relationship with one another. We move from a deity focused thought process to bringing God’s highest creation into focus.

When I describe the heart, of course I am describing the center of humanity’s personal life. It is “the spring of her desires, motives and moral choices.”61 I am not trying to communicate that we capture someone on a shallow level or from an instable mindset. After all, we can see within Scripture how emotions can be as unstable as the waves upon the ocean. What I am writing about is the concept of touching a person at the deepest level and deepest seat of their mindset. Andrew Careaga writes that we must “emphasize the heart over the head and relational learning over cognitive, intellectual learning.”62

This leads us to begin to understand how postmoderns build their systems of doctrine and belief. “Postmoderns do not build their belief system layer by layer upon a foundation of fact and logic. Rather, they rely on a web of various beliefs, we must teach relationship with Christ.”63 Ultimately, as we capture the person’s heart, this will lead us

---

61 Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, 112.
63 Samir Selmanovic, “Pastoring on the Postmodern Frontier”, *Ministry* (Sept. 2001 vol. 74, No. 9), 20.
to deep relationship; first to God and then ultimately we become passionate for God’s passions. God’s passion is His glory by redeeming and drawing His people to Himself.

Being a follower of God, being a disciple, a student of Jesus, means we are building a relationship with the Creator. Within this postmodern economy, relationships rule life. “Our theology must bring us into a love and devotion to God which will fully engage us in a love for the world.”64 The end result of a postmodern theological training within any American church will lead to service and to social transformation.

It is this social transformation that is vital to our understanding. Within Southern Baptist culture, there are and were deacon bodies that helped lead the church; however, it was the strong individual pastor that led the church into success. It would be the strong individual who teaches a Sunday School class or led a bus route in which most of our past theological and discipleship training would be based. “This generation’s concept of discipleship and growth is more focused on community and experience than on individuality that boomers often emphasize.”65

In order for the church to effectively affect change and develop deep, committed believers and inculcate a strong theological framework; seminarians alone cannot be the only ones writing documents about needed change. What it will take is for a generation of churches to rise up and become what I call, “Discipling Churches.”

What are the characteristics of a Discipling Church? Of course, one would think that the role of the church for the past two thousand years has been that of a discipling church. However, that would be an incorrect belief. In brief, Southern Baptist, mainstream churches across America concentrated in the 80’s on the church growth

65 Andrew Carreage, eMinistry, 161.
movement. This movement concentrated on adding physical numbers to the membership of the church, as well as more buildings to go along with the growing membership. While this movement focused upon programs and systems to attain and retain the membership, its strength was not in developing a deep spirituality among its membership, nor was it focused in developing a strong theological tradition within the church. After a decade of churches focused on this concept, a shift occurred due to the success of churches like Willowcreek Community Church. This church brought on the popularity of the “seeker sensitive” movement in the 90’s and early part of the twenty-first century. While this movement has advance the church into the consciousness of our culture, it has also worked to remove theological focus from the fore front. The idea was that “seekers” were not interested in spiritual activities such as worship, theological discussion or even prayer. The hope was that once a seeker would be challenged with the gospel message they would respond to Christ and then part of their spiritual growth would be a hunger for theology and a hunger for spiritual growth. In effect, this movement popularized Christianity in many areas, but did very little to actually deepen one’s theological framework. Because of change in environment, the “seeker sensitive” model has become an older and out dated model for effectively reaching the culture and for communicating and developing theological truth in the lives of this postmodern people.

Reggie McNeal in his book *The Present Future*, noted that the test for orthodoxy typically focused on doctrinal stances and knowledge. In the past we would not measure or focus upon character or connectedness to God and others. “Our old orthodoxy was measured in intellectual assent and knowledge rather than belief in a biblical sense.”

---

We are finding that having only an intellectual assent or a belief system solely based upon logic and propositional truth is wanting within our current culture. In this postmodern time, “Information alone rarely suffices to create belief; it needs to partner with other aspects of how we understand and live in the world…belief is formed when information finds a partner with people’s hopes, experiences, ideas and thoughts.” This issue, staring at us today, is to not make smarter Christians; rather we must begin to produce Christians who are fully engaged and committed to the cause of Christ.

Rather than measuring our new orthodoxy upon doctrinal stances, the discipling church is beginning to focus on core character qualities as a measure for personal orthodoxy within a faith that exists during the postmodern times. George Barna points out that a discipling church is focusing upon twelve core competencies. They are: a mature faith, trustworthiness, truth, wisdom, moral conscience, a virtuous morality, Godly demeanor, controlled temper, appropriate speech, a loving heart, Christ-like values, a servant heart and humility. This transition in orthodoxy from doctrinal stance to personal transformation, in part, has come because the secular world has witnessed years of doctrinally orthodox individuals who have demonstrated shaky personal qualities or poor demeanors toward the people around them. The classic phrase is more true than ever, “People don’t care how much we know, until they know how much we care.” And also, the message won’t be accepted until the messenger lives it out.

Within this new orthodoxy, I am not advocating that we throw away key doctrinal stances and teachings. I am not calling for us to “dumb down” our teachings, rather we must add some tools into our toolbox. Not only is the discipling church giving

---

knowledge to her people, she is also adding specific skills and applications to them. The skills could range from very spiritual things, such as: how to read the Bible or how to memorize Scripture; to very pragmatic subjects, an example would be holistic massage or specific job or family issues such as computer efficiency or parenting issues. The reason for these pragmatic subjects is to show how Christ shines not only in doctrinal and theological arenas, but in every arena of life.

When I write that the discipling church teaches application, the church is teaching the individual not just propositional truth, but also how to learn. The church is not only teaching thoughts, but also how to think. The church is not only giving critique of the culture, but also how to competently critique. “The educational program in the church is often an insult to people’s intelligence. We’re giving them wilted flowers instead of teaching them how to grow by means of God’s Word.”68 These concepts are of great importance in this day and age in which the average person has little ability to discern, to critically think and to create a hermeneutics of our culture.

One of the questions I anticipate the reader to ask is, “What are the signs that a church has crossed over from an old orthodoxy into a new orthodoxy?” For a more thorough understanding of the signs of this kind of church refer to appendix A. In that section, 12 signs will be listed and reviewed.

For a church to effectively teach and transmit theology to a postmodern world, we must be proactive and engage with the culture around us. The reason is that the very people we are trying to influence will turn to this culture as a viable alternative in the face of the doctrine and theology we teach. Therefore, we must not only teach people to

---

68 Howard Hendricks Teaching to Change Lives: 7 proven Ways to Make Your Teaching Come Alive (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1987), 44.
engage with this culture and be able to think for themselves, we must also emerge into this emerging culture.

Emerging into this emerging culture is a third practical step for the church to effectively communicate our theology to this postmodern world. We must understand the hearts and minds of both our congregations and also the people we are attempting to reach. In order to effectively do this we must ask good, hard questions of the present culture. The church also must have a working knowledge of the language in which the postmodern world speaks. Also, we must unlock the doors of our church and begin to welcome the outsiders into our pews.

By asking hard questions of people, we sometimes are recovering some of our old theology. The stalwart might argue that we are second guessing our orthodoxy. We must remember, we are not questioning the Scriptures, but we are challenging people to ask the hard questions about our faith and theology. One pastor addresses this fear by likening our theology and doctrine as springs on a trampoline. “The springs aren’t God…they are statements and beliefs about our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing…they are a means and not an end.”69 We must remember in asking the hard questions and allowing postmoderns to ask hard questions of us that our theology, our understanding of the Scriptures is not sacred. We must always be in a process of reformation and know that I as a pastor, or we as a denomination do not have a monopoly on the truth.

As we are asking hard questions we must also learn to ask better questions, or good questions. For too long, the church has focused upon the wrong sections of life. A practical example, is when “The Last Temptation of Christ” hit the big screen, the church

---

69 Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 22.
by and large refused to dialogue with outside entities about the movie. Instead the church reacted with a strict statement of condemnation against the movie. The church wrote letters to the editor in papers; we picketed theaters all across the country. In the end, more people saw the movie than if we had not said a word or shown any interest in the movie. We gave the movie free advertisement. More disconcerting, the rank and file of our culture believed that the area of the movie the church was fighting against was the nudity and vulgarity in the movie. Granted those scenes in the movie were wrong, but even a greater concern existed in the movie: areas of Christ’s divinity, areas of basic truth about the historical setting of Christ’s crucifixion, the theological significance of Christ’s death on a cross. It was in these important areas that we should have interacted with the culture, but we never took the opportunity to do so. And we are worse off for missing this opportunity; we could have greatly impacted our culture.

Our culture is virtually Biblically ignorant. At one time, we could count on our culture knowing basic Biblical tenets and the basic stories of the Bible. Today, fifth grade children don’t know who Noah is, nor could they name any of Jesus’ disciples. “…they (postmoderns) do not get into the finer points of soteriology, eschatology and ecclesiology…they focus on fundamental questions such as ‘Is Jesus God? What about forgiveness and eternity? What is sin? Why should I tithe my money?’”

Because of this lack of knowledge, we must begin, even with adults, at a more basic level. Also, because of our society’s “advancement” in our culture; there are more theological questions that Paul did not necessarily have to deal with specifically. For instance, our people do not even know how to manage their finances in a way that will please God. Beyond that, how should we think about investing in areas that might be

---

70 George Barna, Grow Your Church From the Outside In (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 112
repugnant to the heart of God? For instance, should I invest finances into a company that aids in the suppression of the Chinese people by their government? These are questions few churches tackle, but our people desperately need to ask these questions and provide answer for them as well.

While I was a youth pastor, there were times I felt totally disconnected from the students. We came from the same geographic areas. We lived in similar homes. We had the same color of skin and same verbal language. But we did not speak the same cultural language. I could not communicate theological truth to these students when I was disconnected from the language and communication that truly affected their passions and hearts. “If you want to communicate to young people and other postmoderns, an awareness of their music, films and books is a necessity, not an option.”71 In Acts 17, when Paul was in Athens, one of the first things he did was begin walking through the community. In his dialogue with the philosophers, we see he was aware of their pagan culture and even keenly aware of pagan poetry. He used this knowledge to further the gospel with these people.

Now the Scripture records in Acts 17:16, “…he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.”72 This passage shows us that Paul did not enjoy this culture; he did not immerse himself into this culture for his own edification or entertainment. In the same way, we must not demean or talk down to postmoderns’ culture; especially in regard to morally neutral movies, books, works of art. At the same time, we must remember that the goal is for the furtherance of the gospel, not to just entertain ourselves.

---
72 Acts 17:16 (New International Version)
But we, “move across the barriers of taste in music, attitudes toward time and money and other basic values for living.”

There is a huge difference in these attitudes between much of the church leadership and the postmoderns in the pews and out in the streets. Sadly many of these differences are age and culture based and not necessarily Scripture based. For instance, the debate of dress standards in worship is an issue that can sharply divide people, but it is not divided by right and wrong, black and white; it is a matter of preference.

So how do we as church leaders navigate these waters? Leonard Sweet, in many of his writings, reminds us to overcome these differences by being a church that is considered an E.P.I.C. church. This stands for experiential, participatory, image-driven, and connected. These four areas will specifically be unpacked in the next chapter, as to how the church teaches our theology through an E.P.I.C. methodology.

If the church wants to engage in this culture and prevail, we must begin to unlock the doors of our church and welcome people from the outside to come in. In the past, many of our churches have had requirements not only for membership, but also for even welcoming the unchurched into our community to explore issues of faith and theology. “Try before you buy postmoderns will not first find the meaning of faith in Christ and then participate and then discern the meaning of faith for their life. Truths about Christ must first be lived before they can be embraced.”

We must recognize that a spiritual journey begins long before conversion. (This is a principle that Reformed theology embraces much better than mainstream Southern Baptists.)

---

By unlocking the church doors, we must take a couple of actions. We must undo some of our “codes” and “secret handshakes” that inhibit people from connecting to our churches. By this I mean the traditions that are not based in Scripture, but those that serve to be a barrier between us and the people outside of the church and our future generations. We also must foster a welcoming atmosphere; in order for them to incorporate our theology. For instance, allow anyone to help in a serving project or play an instrument during a worship service. Through these experiences these postmoderns will see the depth of our theology.

As this is only a snapshot of our philosophy for communicating our theology to postmodern people, both within and outside of the church, the next chapter will address specific actions a church will take to communicate these truths. I have learned and tested most of the principles I have recorded below. I remind everyone reading; postmoderns within and without the church are not beyond the strong hand of God. They can be reached. For the past four years, NorthBridge Church has been a body that has engaged with this culture and effectively drawn postmoderns, challenged them and seen life transformation within their culture by using the principles above to guide our practices recorded below.
The Practices

Although, I am describing some core practices of NorthBridge Church in teaching theology to postmodern people, it is important to note that these methods are not the only ones that are being used successfully. “There is no model that is to be perfectly duplicated, because each group is unique to its local church context, community, people and specific leaders of the church.”75 However, there are some key practices that seem to connect with our culture today in teaching and communicating our theology in ways that will hit the core of the soul.

Even though the focus, for this section, will be on methodology, we are reminded that we are still operating under the primacy of the revealed word of God. “Most of these churches cannot be criticized for watering down Scriptures or not using them. There is a resurgence and respect for the Scriptures.”76 In a unique way, this primacy of Scripture is even somewhat unique in the recent history of the church. Although, many of our churches will say that they are built upon the foundation of the Word of God, really that is not a totally true statement. How many churches in the last 50 years have been considered growing churches that preached and taught Biblically solid life lessons, but have poor leadership or a pastor that was not a dynamic speaker and person? There would be few indeed. The reality is that far too many of our Southern Baptist Churches are not Scripture centered, but pastor centered. And that focus has changed within this

new context, “these emerging pastors see themselves as fellow journeyers. It is no longer an authoritative transferring of Biblical information. Instead, it’s becoming more about spiritual formation and kingdom expansion.”77

This section will first make some general observations about the base on which our practices are built upon. Also, I will define what an E.P.I.C. church looks like and how Northbridge endeavors to live out those concepts. The new old practice of Spiritual formation will be examined as a key tool for introducing and developing our theology into the lives of postmoderns. We will also examine how church planting in our culture is the best tool for kingdom expansion and transferring our theology into the hearts and minds of postmoderns.

There are several themes that impact the practical steps taken to teach and reach postmoderns. Churches that have begun to effectively reach and teach postmoderns have leveraged technology for their advantage. These churches have learned and embraced teaching theology employing different learning styles and they have taught using sensory learning.

Today, postmoderns are capable of a high level of sensory intake. They experience a rapid fire progression of data with little sense of context. Students will work through homework, while texting, blogging, watching their favorite program on television, and keeping up with their favorite celebrity’s twitter. This generation finds stimulation by multitasking and multiprocessing. They receive little stimulation when attending a typical church in America. Why is this? Simply put, American churches typically do little to stimulate postmoderns.

77 Greg Hawkins, Reveal, 87.
Today, a church that is connecting to postmoderns has a significant presence on the internet. “The net is a young medium; whether it ends up becoming a positive influence or a detriment to our spiritual lives remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that the Christian faith will not be left untouched by the Internet.” Some church leaders will refuse to employ the net, these people are afraid of competing messages found on the internet. These teachers discourage people from web surfing. However, this is a futile task. Our society is becoming more and more dependent upon information solely stored on the net. And there is a large amount of Christian theology readily found on the world wide web. And if churches do not believe that their people are already seeking out spiritual information on the net, they are sadly mistaken and naïve. Currently, “20% of our churchmen are using the internet as a source for spirituality and matters of faith.” And these numbers are growing every year.

NorthBridge believes that our people already go to the net, so we must provide tools for them and guide them to other trusted web pages developed for their spiritual growth. Examples of these activities are things such as simply putting our sermons online for people to refer and refer others to. We also use the internet to send out communication, daily devotions, even blogs on current subjects and then we invite the congregation to respond and dialogue about the specific subjects we are addressing.

It only makes sense for a church to leverage the internet for faith development and theological training. “It (internet) is a way for me to grow in faith privately until we get

---

78 Andrew Carreaga, eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publication, 2001), 21.
79 Nancy Beach, An Hour on Sunday: Creating Moments of Transformation and Wonder (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 59
the strength to say our beliefs out loud.” Nicodemus approached Jesus with darkness covering his journey because he had fear while he was in the investigation mode about Jesus; in the same way postmoderns are approaching Jesus under the cover of internet anonymity.

In churches that are successful in teaching theology to postmoderns, a deep sense of community has been developed. However, postmoderns are initially distrustful of such groups and connectedness, at first. How do these churches break through this issue? Initially, it is through the use of technology and the Internet. “In real life, people are afraid to open up. You cannot be as transparent as you ought to be…but online, we feel free to open up and say what needs to be said. People are honest, and there’s confession.”

With technology being used, it is kind of a security blanket. For instance, if a small group uses a video being shown online, the focus is on the video or the technology being deployed, not on an individual. This brings a certain sense of comfort. Also, if we use technology doing interactive tasks such as a question and answer session during a church service, people can rely on technology to transmit data without standing out in the group. For instance, Northbridge has done question/answer sessions during the Sunday service. We will allow people to text questions to our web site, we receive them and answer them in real time. This adds a huge comfort level for those seeking information, but they are still highly engaged in the learning process.

Also, technology helps unite us in a our fast paced and divided culture. Now distance is no longer an excuse for someone being involved in the local church. During a

---

80 Carreaga, 30.
81 Ibid., 37.
recent mission conference we were able to use an internet program that allows us to talk, in real time, to members of our church and friends who were serving in Europe, Africa and China. These are areas where it would be very difficult and costly to depend upon phone lines. However, these areas are highly connected with the Internet and we can use those connections to visit, connect and pray for these missionaries as a church. And the cost of doing so is negligible.

Currently, churches that are strong in teaching theology to postmoderns have learned and embraced the reality that there are various learning patterns. In the past, the church implemented only auditory and reading methodology in order to educate and grow disciples. This will only work for people who are verbal or word based learners. Thom and Joani Schultz have researched church based learning to discover at least seven different types of learning. The Schultz’s record these types of learning being: linguistic, logical, visual/spatial, musical, body/kinesthetic, intra-personal and naturalist.82

When we at NorthBridge are creating a learning event, it is not our goal to have all seven learning styles present. If this were to occur, the experience would be manic. However, we do keep these styles in mind and we refuse to rely solely on linguistic styles to communicate theology. We might promote some kind of environment so the spatial people could respond to. Or we might present a problem to be worked through and allow time to dialogue about the event afterward. This would highly engage those who are intrapersonal to connect, along with the linguistic people.

Along with these types of learning we also take into account that God has given us more than our ears to take in data to learn His principles and ways. “We learn best

82 Thom & Joani Schultz, The Dirt on Learning: Groundbreaking Tools to Grow Faith in Your Church (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), 57,58
when we use each of our senses, not just our sense of hearing. We pick up on 10% to 15% of what we hear through the spoken word…most of our learning is nonverbal.”

Yet, historically most churches will only communicate theology through verbal methods. The only way these churches will involve any other body part for learning could be to involve the eyes to read information from texts. Other than that most churches will not focus on sight, touch, smell, and taste; they only focus on hearing.

Churches and pastors that only employ hearing in their teaching methodology will not adequately transmit theology to postmodern people. The answer for us, at NorthBridge, was to challenge ourselves to be an E.P.I.C. kind of church. The next section will unpack what exactly this acronym means and how we as part of the body of Christ have unpacked this for Southwest Missouri.

The letter E is for experiential. In order to effectively teach theology to this postmodern generation, we must strive to create an atmosphere within our churches that is experiential. “People want interaction, something that will jar them out of their monotony. They want to be touched, not by the numbing effect of a top-down monologue aimed at the mind, but by the power of a full-bodied personal experience.”

This is an age of experience. Entire economies are based upon people collecting experiences, just as an avid coin collector would find rare coins. If we think back to thirty years ago, a mother would bake a home made cake and have a party on the birthday of her child. Today, there would be no cake made, who has time or the ability anymore. Instead parents will pay a large some of money to take their child and friends to some location that caters to children. Why? A cake and gifts are no longer sufficient, we want

---

84 Ibid., 15.
our kids to remember their party, they will remember the party if they have a great experience to remember.

As NorthBridge endeavors to be experiential, we attempt to do this through several venues. We want our worship gatherings to be experiential, within this context we strive to make our talks/sermons more than a time to disseminate information. The pastors want an experience to occur within the talk. We want people to walk away, not only smarter, but having the core of their being deeply touched through an experience. We not only strive to be experiential on Sundays, but our goal is to create experiences throughout our calendar year.

One way we have raised the experiential quotient within the body was to create a team of people known as the “Creative Team.” This team is populated with artists, musicians and overall creative people. There job is simply to make sure our congregation walks away each week saying, “I was so impacted by the teaching, worship and prayer in that church today.” This team will ask itself, “Have we surprised our congregation? Also, has our church grown tired and predictable lately? Are our people viewers of the worship, or are they engaged fully in the celebration and are they actively growing.

Within the service, the sermon is a focal point for the day. Therefore, we have changed how we write our sermons and how we present them. “We no longer write sermons, we now create total experiences.”85 No longer am I, as a pastor only concerned about teaching theologically correct sermons. While this is still just as important, the issue of connecting the congregation to the thoughts and ideas of the message on an emotional level is also present. As we have already noted, by getting to the heart or the

---

emotions, we are now connecting with the total person. The best way to do this is to make the message experiential. By doing this, postmoderns will more effectively connect to our theological moorings.

One way in which we do this at NorthBridge is to rely upon the art of storytelling. “Jesus use of parable made the familiar strange. Biblical parable and metaphor works to shock us into new awareness.”86 This is the goal for including storytelling into the bag of tools we have to make the sermon experiential. Part of the experience is challenging people to not be passive, but to engage with the message and be an active participant. “A traditional sermon tells people what to think. A story forces people to do the thinking for themselves.”87 Many pastors believe they tell good stories by simply including short stories as illustrations for their sermons. However, this is not necessarily the case. The Schultz’s note that simplicity, suspense, shared emotion, and a surprising start and stop are critical for crafting a story in such a way that the story is experiential for the audience. Also a key part of the story delivery is to not always explain the story.88

With experiential learning a key element is to allow the hearer to process and answer some of the hard questions. In the past, pastors would give a nice neat sermon prepackaged, digested and regurgitated for the audience. No thought would be required on the hearer’s part. One of the hardest things for a pastor to develop, when teaching to postmoderns, is the ability to not give every answer and allow the hearer to develop and sometimes draw their own conclusion. This is ultimately a trust issue, that the Holy

86 Leonard Sweet, Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 150.
87 Miller, 41.
88 Schultz, 78.
Spirit has the ability to help direct the hearer down the right road to develop the right thoughts and answers.

Not only are we to make our churches experiential on Sundays, but we must endeavor to make the whole culture of the church experiential. One way we do this is by treating everyone who walks through our doors as students. These postmodern students enjoy the adventure of discovery within the learning process. “After 30 days a student will remember 10% of what they hear, 15% of what they see, and 40% of what they discuss and 80% of what they do…”\textsuperscript{89} Therefore, we try and create experiences. The key is to get people doing. One way we will do this is for our teen and college students to participate in Disciple Now. This is a weekend in which discussion, Bible Study, and even active participation in spiritual practices occur. Other churches will take this and apply it to adults, they call these experiences Emmaus Walks or a Jesus Journey. Often when preparing these encounters, one will spend just as much time preparing the experience as preparing the subject matter to be delivered.

Another event that is highly experiential within our church is the involvement in short-term mission projects. For their entire history, the Southern Baptist Convention, has been highly engaged in foreign and domestic missions. However, until the most recent past, our involvement was held to reading mission reports, raising money for missions and occasionally meeting someone who was or is a full-time missionary. Within this postmodern generation, the wall has been torn down and now we are able to send our members into the field for short time periods. This creates incredible experiences for our people to live through. By doing this we help our people to

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 155.
encounter life on the mission field. When this happens our people not only learn, but live out their theology in the deepest sense.

As we seek to continue to connect postmoderns to our theology, these people become drawn deeper into the theological story through high participation within the body of Christ. To successfully disciple and grow these people we must engage them deeper than simply attending and passively “soaking” in the message. Generally speaking, the higher the level of engagement, the higher the level of commitment to Christ. The two things we have done to increase the participatory theme is to champion an interactive teaching model and to be permission giving during our worship gatherings.

We have focused on training our small group leaders that they are not to view themselves as theological experts. We have given an expectation that if there is little or no exchange between them and their small groups, they are failing.

Why do we set this standard? Quite simply, “People learn and retain more when they get to talk.”90 As we have already seen, postmoderns are attracted to belonging to a tribe of people. They cannot be part of a tribe if they cannot participate on multiple levels with their tribe.

The methodology we use in small group is called the question based method. In this method our small group leaders attempt to keep the questions stimulating, open ended, and succinct. Not only do we focus on life application questions, but we will dig deeper and move into theological questioning. What is the character of God? Or how was the world created? What is the nature and purpose of humanity? What happens after we die on this Earth? What is truth? These are examples of common theological questions that are discussed within their small groups.

90 Ibid., 53.
“The question based method is probably the most effective because it forces people to think, they own the answers and the questions easily translate into personal application.”91 We allow and encourage discussion from anyone with comments, reflection, views, even dissension about what’s being said. “When people see that their input and their thoughts matter, we become a community where people feel encouraged and called to share in other ways.”92

At first glance, this methodology doesn’t seem all that radical. However, this is a very uncommon practice within many of our American churches. The numbers speak for themselves. The Schultz’s conducted some research on the prevalence of this form of teaching. They discovered out of 2,000 Lutheran churches, 75% had teachers that took a lecture approach; only 23% of these churches had adult classes with an interactive, question-based format.93

We also encourage a participatory approach in what kinds of activities we promote within the Sunday worship experience. Most Southern Baptist Churches in Missouri take a sit and observe approach for their worship services. However, we teach people to move around the room in order to go to prayer stations during the service or connect to some activity station connected to the theme of our teaching. Often during our response time, we have props for them to use as reminders of what they were committing to during the weekdays, when they are away from the church building. We find that as people participate in some form, even if it is to get up from their chair and move from

---

91 George Barna, Think Like Jesus (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2003), 185.
93 Schultz, 55.
point A to point B, the retention rate for the teaching is higher than just allowing them to sit in a chair and be passive during the worship experience.

We have noted, at NorthBridge, that this sense of participation has transformed an individual’s spirituality. In the past, Baptists would gather and learn theology through Sunday School, Sunday evening Training Union, sermons and personal Bible study. However, today postmodern people have shifted in their methodology to grow spiritually. Today people are seeking to reach back to their spiritual roots and learn about spiritual practices that can add to their growth. There is more of an open attitude than ever before to spiritual activities that focus on the study and meditation of God’s Word. Some of these practices include lectio divina, fasting, memorization, and focus prayer. The way our church employs these things to add to our discipleship and theological formation program is to plan recurring discipleship retreats in which we teach these programs and then put tools into the people’s hands in order for them to add these practices into their spiritual life. Another portion of this programming is under the title of Spiritual Formation; we will address this subject in further detail below.

The experiential and participation driven culture also lends for us to create an image driven church. In the past, we as good Southern Baptists have been repulsed by images. We have regarded images as forms that would drive our culture to idolatry. Historically, Southern Baptist congregations have worked to purge all images from within the church. Therefore, most of our church buildings consist of plain walls with a cross, a Communion table and a pulpit on the center of the platform.

However, within the last five years, some congregations have become increasingly aware of a consciousness of images, symbols and representations that are not
worshiped or venerated, but serve to point us to deeper and loftier things. This effort really began with our teen and young adult culture. “We saw we had media savvy teens who responded to symbols, imagery and personal participation.”

As we developed the heart and soul of NorthBridge, we have extended this trend from youth and college ministry into the life of the whole church. We have found that, “…image can be used as points of contact to explore the big issues of life without compromising the integrity of the gospel.” Brian McLaren made this discovery within his congregation and I concur.

Some will reject images and sacred art and symbols’ thinking it adds little to the advancement of individual spiritual development and theological training. When sacred symbology (the art of creating symbols) is done well it is an added tool to communicate the deep truths of Scripture to our conscious mind, to our heart and to our soul. In the past, we have only relied upon the printed page to communicate truth. Andrew Carreaga writes, “It (Scripture) must be released from the tyranny of the printed page to reach a wired, digitized, hyper-connected world.” Why the case? Leonard Sweet says it is because, “images generate emotions and people will respond to their feelings” in the postmodern world.

At NorthBridge, we have not highlighted an image driven culture by commissioning murals on the walls or by creating intricate stained glass. One of the simple ways in which we use images, is by simply showing videos and movies. For instance, we have used videos that are direct, word for word interpretations of the

---

94 Miller, 93.
96 Carreaga, 115.
97 Lenard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 86.
Scriptures during the “reading” of the Word so our people could have a visual experience of God’s Word.

Also, we will create sets and backdrops to go along with the themes in order to help show the subject of our teaching. When we teach on sin, we will dirty up the stage and we will throw garbage on the sides of the aisles in order to show the filthiness of sin. Also, unlike the medieval church, we will not commission works of art, but thanks to technology, we will find appropriate works of art related to the teachings and show them during the message on overhead projectors so our people can experience the visual effect of the teaching of Scripture.

Within every person there is a hunger for connection with others: with husband or wife, with children, with extended family, with neighbors and with friends. In the past, people would go to church and celebrate out of the connectedness they had throughout the week. With the erosion of our society and connection being a rare commodity in our culture, now it is imperative for our churches to champion and facilitate connection within the body of Christ.

Besides the many applications and benefits for connection with the body of Christ, I have found that postmodern people will develop and grow deeper within their faith with the presence of a feeling of interconnectedness among them and others within the church. As the church develops community several factors need to be present in order to be successful. First, we must avoid the temptation of segregating our people based upon age and sex. We also must be very intentional in championing community. Finally, the church has to be authentic in their community.
The modern church viewed age and sex segregated class structure as a goal to be proud of and to encourage all churches to accomplish this feat. The publishing company for Southern Baptists, Lifeway, has based 90% of their product line on age based and even sex based curriculum. However, we are finding that churches successful in growing postmodern people into fully functioning followers of Christ are not compartmentalizing people. It is our role as the church to bring the generations together to worship, serve, fellowship and learn together. “Grouping learners by age makes the assumption that everyone of a certain age develops at the same rate, learns at the same pace, has similar interests, and has identical needs.”98

E.P.I.C. churches that are striving to effectively communicate theological truth to postmoderns must strive to champion community within the body. What gets talked about from behind the pulpit will get done. What gets measured gets accomplished within the life of the church. If church leadership says that community is important but does nothing to accomplish the goal of achieving it; community will lag within that church. If community lags within the church, the people will find it somewhere else. One way we, at NorthBridge, have made sure community will not slide by the way side is to require all church membership be part of our small group ministry.

Small group ministry varies from church to church. One important thing is to keep the group small enough for everyone to be able to significantly participate. Also, the small group comes together for the purpose of growing into fully devoted followers of Christ. There is a high expectation that the group discuss with one another about the

98 Schultz, 61.
study and their life. “This creates a sense of communal unity that comes from shared experience.”

Perhaps what best defines an E.P.I.C church is a church that has embraced spiritual formation as the model for developing people into fully functioning followers of Christ and theologically mature believers. A recent wave for growing disciples is called spiritual formation. This concept is not a revolutionary new approach. Rather it is a resynthesizing of standard spiritual practices used by Christians of old. It is a complete approach to seeing that the believer not just be theologically mature, but theologically mature with a passionate heart for the things of God moved to His service.

This is a call to bring the total person into engagement with our theological tenets, not just the mind. What this practice does is to “provide our people with Bible content that is always placed in broad context. We don’t want to teach stand alone concepts in teaching theology. Every principle should be taught and applied in connection to every other principle, showing the veracity of Scripture and its holistic nature.”

This process is radically different than the theological training in most of our churches today. Currently, most churches have a program of discipleship in place and a sermon plan some might call a liturgy already in place. Little thought will be given to specific needs of specific individuals as these programs are implemented. Success for these programs is determined upon how many individuals successfully complete the course work. However, we pay little attention to how successful the church is in transferring our theological principles into a person’s life.

99 Miller, 120.
100 Barna, Think Like Jesus, 184
Spiritual formation is unique in that there is no set program for every person to go through. “The spiritual formation process should be customized and shaped to the learner for intentional outcomes.” To be most effective for our people we must have theological training tools that are very flexible for our people, tied to a flexible timetable and schedule. “We cannot force on them what we think they need, they will only buy what they feel they need.” Also, in past generations it can be assumed that whole groups of people had very specific needs to address in life. However, now with the buffet of information and choices at the finger tips of postmodern people, there is a vast array of issues that each individual needs to have focused upon. As we design this curriculum for individuals, the church must keep in mind the current reality of family life, work life and over all schedules.

As a church would design a program for an individual to complete, there are several core competencies that would be found in some form or fashion in every plan. A church effectively using spiritual formation as a tool for theological training and spiritual growth includes the following skills: study techniques, memorization, critical thinking and logic. Spiritual formation not only includes learning, but also application and how to practice spiritual disciplines.

Even though each person’s plan might look different, there are basic components found in most formations. There would be several new believer classes that cover a variety of basic theological issues. There would be a reading list of books to both read and discuss with a group. Life planning and leadership training skills should be covered to some level. There should be a section covering spiritual gift assessment and some labs

---

to help the students work out their gifts in a somewhat controlled environment. The curriculum would include memorization, as well as, online curriculum to be worked through on the participant’s time table.

The interesting paradigm shift is the use of books. Earlier in this text, the need to release postmodern people from the “tyranny of the text” was discussed. However, once a person is involved in spiritual formation, this person comes full circle. Even in this postmodern age, the church cannot be anti-literature. Instead our mantra must be, “If you ain’t reading, you ain’t leading.”\textsuperscript{103} We don’t lead with the book as the primary learning resource, but once we have captured the attention of the postmodern people, we introduce them to our wonderful texts, rich in theological truth. Spiritual formation will involve books in everything, once the postmodern learner is in this stage.

A key concept that is central in all spiritual formation programs is the use of a spiritual guide or mentor. As the program begins, it is often the role of the pastor. However, as the church grows and spiritual formation captures the attention of many people, the pastor must begin training other people to act as mentors. The personal approach of having a mentor is crucial. “55% interviewed said if church matched them with a mentor they would be more likely to pursue growth suggestions.”\textsuperscript{104} In a sense, the mentor serves as a personal coach for growth.

The mentor’s role is to help diagnose the theological needs of the student. Also, the mentor prescribes activities and actions for the students to complete. Initially, the mentor would ask several diagnostic questions to help assess the needs of the student. One church in California uses the following four questions:

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{104} Barna, \textit{Growing True Disciples}, 42.
1. How is your relationship with God?
2. What is helping you grow spiritually these days?
3. What question would you ask God if you could ask Him anything?
4. If you were to write out a statement of faith, what would it include?105

By answering these questions, the mentor will begin to tap the initial starting point for a theological journey for the student.

Another key approach to create more disciples in this postmodern world that are growing in their theological understanding is to plant new churches where postmoderns reside. “Research shows that new churches bring in more unbelievers than do long established churches.”106 It seems that the unchurched and dechurched postmodern people will not populate traditional, established churches. However, they are open to new churches that are recently established and considered fresh and without a significant past.

Also, assuming that strong leadership exists, these young churches are agile and small enough to effectively provide the one to one leadership and coaching these people require. They also have the ability to experiment with alternative teaching methodologies and attempt new ways to communicate theology in an effective manner. In a nutshell, new churches are attractive to the postmodern culture. These people will come to these churches and they are being shaped by our theology, slowly and surely. With time, these churches will influence our culture effectively.

Of course, as we have reviewed core understanding in training and teaching postmoderns theological truth today, we must not forget the key component. This component is the same idea that our church fathers had to lean unto for understanding. It

106 Brian McLaren, Doing Ministry in a Postmodern Matrix” Liaison, (Spr 2001), 1.
is a reliance upon the Holy Spirit to direct and guide as we search out ways to communicate to the culture in which we find ourselves. We cannot overstate the need to be directed by our God in all of our efforts to coach and train this next generation. We could be incredibly relevant and successful in drawing people into theological discussion and training. However, if we miss the leading from God’s Spirit, all is lost for the church at this juncture.
The Objections

As one reads this work, no doubt several objections rise to the mind. This section will address two specific objections. First, by making these changes, the church is abandoning the truth. Second, the goal is not for the church to be relevant; the goal is to be faithful.

Some believe that by changing up our theological training and our techniques for teaching Scripture and growing others spiritually, we are walking away from the truth of Scripture. We are doing this in order to make these post modern people feel comfortable, so some will claim. The simple answer to this objection is to refer to the past writing in this work. No where in this work is there a mention or even a hint of changing our theological tenets. There is not even a mention of withholding some of our less-than-politically-correct teachings from the students.

Clearly, as we strive to communicate our theology to this culture; we want them to hear our message clearly and ultimately transfer those principles into their lives. We are not looking to change our faith or compromise God’s revelation of Himself. “Our relationship to the postmodern world must be one of communication, not compromise.”

One fear that many in the church might have is over the transfer of authority given to the individual. In the past, fathers of the church not only set the agenda of sacred beliefs, but how they would be communicated. In order for the church to transform the hearts and lives of postmodern people, in effect we are inviting these

---

107 Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches In A Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 118.
people into relationship, partnership and discussion over theological issues, a sort of transferring authority. The fear is during this process of giving up control the church will begin to embrace heresy, rather than stand firm on the core doctrines we have held fast to in the past. Also, what if a strong-willed, highly influential pagan gets involved in a small group and rather than turning their heart towards the grace of God, this person shifts the whole group into theological error and darkness?

Doug Paggitt answers this question from experience. He pastors a church that boasts a high pagan attendance on a regular basis. His congregation is reaching and teaching these postmodern people our theological truth. This is how he answers this doubt, “Our theology and our God cannot be unraveled by someone getting up and saying something goofy for four minutes.”

In order for this statement to be true, our small groups and pews must be filled with not only postmodern people but an equal or even greater amount of mature, theologically deep believers. There seems to be a fear of “dumbing down” our church goers by changing the discipleship and theological process. The reality is that we are not typically producing deeply committed, mature believers currently. I refer to chapter three showing the current issues that exist both inside and outside of the church. If we were producing a great number of theologically mature followers of God, I would not be writing a paper asking how we can more effectively reach and teach the church.

Another objection to changing the current model of teaching our theology is that we should not be striving for relevancy. With this objection I agree. A church working overtime at relevance could resemble a middle age man trying to take on the style and

---

culture of his teenage son: sad and pathetic. However, just as relevancy is not our goal, neither is maintaining the status quo.

The goal of the church today is found in Matthew 28:19, 20. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Throughout all of Scripture, the church is given specific instruction for living this commission out. “You cannot be faithful to the Great Commission without being culturally relevant.” One such teaching comes from Jesus, found in Matthew 5. In this passage, Jesus instructs us to be “salt” and “light” to the world. We are to make a difference in this world. “A church that does not address the issues that matter to the culture is worse than irrelevant; it is a church that ignores Jesus instruction to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the world.”

Was not Jesus ministry on earth relevant not just for the spiritual needs of all mankind, but even specifically for the culture in which he was living? Jesus spoke directly to issues of lawsuits, of Sabbath laws, issues of social justice and carrying legionnaire’s packs. When John wrote the book of Revelation, he wrote specifically to the church of that day and addressed very specific issues, using specific word pictures that the church of that day understood clearly. And we could add every writer of the Bible to this list.

While we clearly do not make relevance our goal, God bless the men and women He gives to the church who can challenge us to make sure we are using relevant language

---

109 Matthew 28:19, 20 (NIV)
111 Andrew Carreaga eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publication, 2001), 109.
and images. These people will hold our collective feet to the fire to challenge us to answer the questions our culture is asking of us. Jesus and his first generation of followers were speaking and addressing the people of their day using terms, images and proposals that were relevant to those people, in the same way, we must do the same for the people of this age.

When objections are brought forth to the ideas of this work we must ask the question, “What is driving these objections?” A filter we could use to help us in this process is to ask, “Are we being faithful to the call that Jesus has commissioned us with or less faithful?” Are we more engaged, being “salt” and “light” to this world or less?

Many of the objections one could have in dealing with the issues and the changes addressed in this work are ultimately issues of dealing with change. No doubt the past generations have found safety and security within the church because the church has certain stability. There is something in the human nature that makes it appealing that the songs we sing were the same songs our parents sang. The liturgy we experience today was the same liturgy that a generation or several generations from the past have practiced. Change can be difficult. See appendix C in dealing with change.
Conclusion

We are at a crossroads, and we have a choice to make. Before we make this choice, I conclude this work with two anecdotes. These stories ultimately take us to the cross roads of where we find ourselves during this time in our culture. Ultimately, every pastor and every church must decide which path they will take.

While doing a mission project on an Indian reservation located in Minnesota, I met an old chief. At this time I was a very young man, most would call me a boy. This ancient chief’s wrinkles were well defined on his face and his hands were as cracked and leathery as the work gloves I was taking off as I was finished with my project for the day. He had a certain dignity about him that few possess today.

As I was coming in for dinner, he and I struck up some conversation. At first, we stayed on the surface level. However, as the conversation progressed, we connected on a much deeper level.

He began to tell of life in the early part of this past century. He spoke of the pride he had as an American Indian. He experienced true freedom or so he thought. However, as a young man he was forced (his words, not mine) to submit to the white man’s religion.

He was not at first taught about creation, our need for God, or even Christ’s work on the cross. His first lesson was why he and his other Indian brothers must embrace the white man’s clothes and give up his traditional garb. In order to accept the living God as His Lord and Savior, he must first cut his hair and take off his traditional jewelry. This was a missiological disaster.
Several years later, I found myself at a mission’s conference. One of the keynote speakers was a man serving on the plains of Africa. As this man related about his experiences, he shared about the need and dependence upon the Spirit for guidance. He related this story as an example.

He and his wife would go into villages and do chronological Bible storying as outreach. They were training these Africans theologically in a manner, in which I am advocating for our culture today. After a year of teaching on creation, Abraham, Israel, David, and the exile; they ultimately got to the life of Jesus. When they taught on Christ death and resurrection, one wealthy man trusted his life to Christ. This man repented and was made into a new creation. He immediately submitted to the missionaries for more training and longed for spiritual growth and maturity.

However, one problem existed that needed a thoughtful and prayerful remedy. In that culture, it was a sign of wealth and wisdom for a man to have more than one wife. This new believer in fact had four wives. What should happen to them? Was it permissible for this man to keep his wives? After all, the patriarchs in Scripture and kings of Israel had multiple wives. Yet, in that day and certainly today we see the moral imperative from God for one man to be with one woman.

However, the choice was not simple to make. If the missionary instructed this man to send three wives away, it would spell disaster for them. In effect, they would be sentenced to a life of prostitution since they would be marked in the culture as women who were divorced and sent away.

This missionary was successful in contextualizing the gospel and his theological beliefs. He knew the core teachings of Jesus that involved love and mercy. He knew that
God watches over the widow and the orphan. He was convinced that God would not want these women on the streets.

The solution: this man was to keep his first wife and matriarch of the home as his actual wife. However, he would keep the other three wives on his tribal compound and provide for them and their children. With his provision though, he would never take them into his bed chamber, nor assume upon them the responsibilities that his first wife would live out.

What is the point of these two stories? We have a choice to go about the work of honoring God, by joining Him in His work of building the church in this culture without any consideration for the language or values of this culture. Or we can join God in His work and give careful thought to how we communicate our theology specifically with this culture. This is the question we face.

My point is that we must join the missionary to Africa and engage our culture in the same manner as he. This is an incredible challenge. We must live out of this reality and yet remain faithful to the core of the very theology we are trying to contextualize for this postmodern culture.

Are our churches ready to meet the challenge? Diogenes Allen says, “They (the church) have within their heritage immensely powerful ideas, not to mention a living Lord.” We can meet this challenge. Will the church embrace this reality and engage the world? It must, it has to, sooner or later.

---

Appendix A-Twelve Signs of a Discipling Church

Imagine, what if we would devalue programs, attendance statistic and dollar within a ministry, and instead focus on depth and authenticity in teaching theology to the members of the body of Christ. This is what a discipling church is attempting. In effect, these churches are redefining success. George Barna gives several big ideas that he believes shapes the look and feel of a fully functioning, prevailing discipling church.

- **Celebrative Worship**—these churches teach that Sunday is for all believers to celebrate together. However, this is not the only worship the congregation experiences. They are worshiping the other six days of the week independently. This worship is real, meaningful and affects the home of the independent worshipers.

- **Personal Application**—the church is providing tools, coaching and time for the laity to discover new information. The church will allow time for personal application to occur within their programming time.

- **Spirit Empowered Leadership**—the board and leadership of the team will champion leadership direction set not by denominational polity or creeds, but a sense of complete submission to the Holy Spirit in all matters.

- **Sensitivity to Sin**—within these churches sin is taken far more seriously than even churches from a decade ago. These churches are seeking not to offend God and are wounded, if an offense is made known.

- **Community of caring**—there is a sense of incredible stewardship. Within these churches there is, not only a sense, but an expectation that time, money, talents and other resources are shared by the family with those who have true need.

- **Transformational Community**—there is no desire for the church to be made up of individuals and families. Rather the discipling church is one spiritual family that transcends our culture and earthly relationships and understanding.

- **Organic Evangelism**—the process of sharing the faith with “preChristians” is holistic and natural. These churches are getting back to the “as you go into the world” mentality. They are not encouraging artificial times and scenarios to force a gospel presentation from the body of Christ.

- **Uncomfortable Teaching**—as the Scriptures are being taught a resurgence of getting to the heart of message without cutting corners or hiding difficult passages or uncomfortable meanings. The body then honestly engages with these texts and
work to figure out what adjustments must be made to remain faithful to God and His message.

- **Online Communication**-these churches will live out prayer that is continuous within the body of the church. These churches knows and understands where their power and authority emanates.

- **Gift-Based Serving**-believers are encouraged and regularly challenged to use their gifts, skills and training for the benefit of the church and even the outside world without be cajoled, tricked or guilted into serving.

The above principles were taken from Barna’s *Growing True Disciples*.

---

Appendix B-Dealing with change.

When we face the future and we speak of change within the church our members will feel upset. “Why do we have to change the way we do things?” “How many more changes do we have to endure?” ‘Will all these changes make any difference?’ These are some of the feelings that unavoidably come up when changes are presented to the church.

A central problem within the modern church is a refusal to change. Many people are mystified and confused by the practices within most churches. Music that is not heard or recognized on the radio, strange seats, an insider language that no outsider totally understands, and robes that date to the Reformation, this screams “No Change!” These things are not helping the church accomplish its mission and task. Actually, these things serve to counter our mission. They tend to frustrate and alienate the postmodern people. Yet, many of us refuse to change. As the culture continues to change and move, the church embraces the theme, “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.”

Unfortunately, we tend to fight change, partly due to our liberal counterparts within the church. For these churches, event he doctrines of Scripture are allowed to change. Even then, many of these churches will not allow change in structure, church culture or teaching practices. This is the worst practice possible. They will change what should never change, but hold true to the things that are meant to shift and flex with time.

For understanding about how to embrace change, we should refer to Scripture. The book of Acts tells of the friction between the Holy Spirit and the church leadership. God actively seeks for the church to move from Jerusalem to reach the vast amount of pagan people, outside of the church’s stronghold. But this first generation of Christians
was not willing to change and boldly go into this unknown area. Acts 10 and 11 show this issue crystal clear.

Luke shows clearly the extreme length God took to get Peter in a position and a mindset to preach to a pagan, Cornelius and his household. This incident is found in Acts 10. Once Peter finally agreed, he carried out his mission and the entire home of Cornelius was saved.

In chapter 11, instead of the church at Jerusalem being overjoyed at Peter’s experience; they were concerned about this change and they criticized him. After a retelling of Peter’s experiences and how God worked within him, the obstinate church finally “had no objections and praised God.”\textsuperscript{114} Luke is showing how difficult this transition was for the church.

Despite this change in thinking, there was still a stubbornness to continue to do ministry as they had done previously. Verse 19 says, “Now those who had been scattered…traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.”\textsuperscript{115} After this message from Peter this church still has not changed. We see that ultimately the church in Antioch was willing to do something new, change and begin teaching the gentiles. Because of this, God’s activity shifted from the church in Jerusalem to the church in Antioch.

What does this teach us? It is a difficult thing to convince even true followers that change is an important and always needed function in the church. No decision or action we can take as a church will ever be so effective that it will remove the need for subsequent change later in time.

\textsuperscript{114} Acts 11:17 (NIV)
\textsuperscript{115} Acts 11:19 (NIV)
A church that will not change has developed a grievous idol which offends the Spirit of God. In our efforts to control our church-to develop a false sense of security from the stability of our church culture, we have placed our own comfort ahead of the needs of this culture we claim we want to minister. God will not tolerate this attitude. He will move to find another church that will change in order to live out His purpose and His ways.

Make no mistake, change is difficult, it is hard work to change. Also, there will be mistakes when church leaders move for change. To this I postulate that a church that wishes for no errors in their ministry is insisting upon a church that does not experience any change. When we refuse to embrace changes as God calls for us to change, we are refusing to embrace God.
Bibliography


