

MESSAGE, METHODOLOGY, AND RELEVANCY OF POSTMODERNISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

Anthony Manswell, Caribbean Theological College

Introduction

The church is called to exist in the midst of a shifting world view that has moved from modernity to postmodernity (Oord, 2001; Spaulding 2001). Exegesis and contextualization of biblical truths must take into consideration the challenge of postmodernism with both its pros and cons. Theological reflection must understand the postmodern mind in order to make theology relevant to the time, while remaining true to biblical and theological principle, if there will be a serious attempt to impact the present world. So, what is postmodernism? What is postmodernity?

A Wikipedia article on postmodernity states,

Postmodernity is the state or condition of being postmodern (i.e., after or in reaction to what is modern), particularly in reference to postmodern art and postmodern architecture. In philosophy . . . , postmodernity more specifically refers to the state or condition of society which is said to exist after modernity. A related term is postmodernism, which refers to movements, philosophies or responses to the state of postmodernity, or in reaction to modernism (§ 3).

Weiss and Wesley (2001) stated, “One of the essential elements of Postmodernism is that it is an attack against theory and methodology. . . . However, there are two methodologies characteristic of Postmodernism. These methodologies are interdependent in that interpretation is inherent in Deconstruction” (§ 25).

This paper explores the idea that understanding postmodernism and incorporating a theistic worldview with redeemable aspects of postmodernism can bring about an effective relevancy to theological education. This important concept needs unpacking.

A Visual Representation of Postmodernism

In the Conference of Educators in Trinidad (2004), a version of the following chart that was presented demonstrated the shift in worldview from the 1700 to the present. The chart also provided an initial insight into the implications for the church’s response to postmodernity. For each of the doctrinal areas listed on the left of the chart, there is an explanation of what the

Theistic, Modern, and Postmodern worldviews emphasized. For example, God was at the center in a theistic world, human thought was at the center in a modern worldview, and the individual (even though related to the modern worldview) is at the center in a postmodern worldview.

DOCTRINES	Theistic Worldview (until 1700s/ Revelational)	Modern Worldview (1700-1980s/ Empirical)	PostModern Worldview 1970s- Present/Process
CENTER	God	Rationalism	Individual/Subjective
TRUTH	Absolute; Revealed in Bible	Absolute; Discovered (Science and Reason)	Relative; Community Based
KNOWLEDGE	Leads to God; Helps us to reflect His character	Is certain, good, objective and is used to control nature	Tentative, good and bad; cooperative; includes intuition and emotion
GOD	Good, holy, personal; Ruler of all	Distant, removed, irrelevant; Figment	Many gods, including the individual
NATURE	Created by and dependent upon God	Eternal and Evolutionary	Deconstructive
HISTORY	Purpose and direction	Cause and effect with no purpose but with direction	Pleasure seeking with direction
HUMANITY	Created in the image of God	Combination of physical elements	Spiritual and relational
CHURCH	Fortress/Bulwark of Truth	Creation of non-scientific crutch	Community; Familial relationships
MISSION	Global	Regional	Local
OUTLOOK	Hopeful	Optimistic	Guardedly pessimistic
THEOLOGICAL TASK	Codification and certification of biblical authority/Truth	Rational, scientific critique of religious/biblical tradition	Seeking relational/spiritual aspects of life for practical application

The Challenge of Relevancy

Corson (1998) looked at the concept of diversifying education to meet the needs of populations that have become diverse. He argued that if there is relevancy to the question that diversity is educationally relevant, there must be provisions for meeting the demands of diversity.

The writer of this paper believes that the entrapments of advocacy for homogeneous units of like ethnicity, color, and race to interact are no longer a viable option for educational systems to be successful as learning environments. The shifting worldview that now reflects

postmodernity creates a ripe environment for education to become inclusive. Postmodernity allows for a world that is interconnected in relation to the desire to explore and incorporate elements from different cultural practices. Perhaps (and it may be too early in this piece to conclude that), the uneducated ones at present or in the near future will be the ones who have been deprived of a rich diversified education. Corson wrote, “ In this new world [of postmodernity], many more voices are being raised, including the voices of those who were once disposed; these voices are bringing a surprisingly different range of messages to policy makers and practitioners alike” (p. 2).

There is a paradox within which education and educators function. This paradox is captured in the following quote from Corson:

On the one hand, in this new world of postmodernity, human diversity is being recognized at last. On the other hand, people’s real sociocultural identities have little value in the marketplace of that new world. As a consequence, wherever the values and interests of schools are linked tightly into that marketplace, students and teachers from diverse backgrounds find that their interests are still missing from education (p. 4).

The shift must be education that is integrated by including diversity through the dominant culture and sub-cultures in curriculum design and instruction for effective education. Apple and Beane (1998) wrote, “Census figures display growing cultural diversity while pressure is applied to keep the curriculum within the narrow boundaries of the Western cultural tradition” (p.3). Can education be truly viewed as education, when content from various sources is excluded? This is the key question that begs for an answer.

In this same vein Corson calls for liberation from oppressive structures that breathe of exclusivism. He wrote, “Schools play a key role in ‘social and cultural reproduction’. [And] schools are places where most of a culture’s dominant discourses are passed around and passed on” (p. 10).

If, as Corson believed, education is wrapped in economics, then the dominant group in culture dictates the curriculum in schools. Labeling, association of groups by certain designations, and exclusion of weaker sub-cultures are all emerging subjects that become the themes of particular education. In such an environment, education cannot function at its best because the true culture of the general populace is not represented. Disenchantment, aggression, and dropout all form part of the noticeable outcomes of educational environments. In sync with

these thoughts, Corson wrote, “against this background, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the power of formal education is socially unjust (p.11).

This fits with my concept of integrating education by including both dominant cultures and sub-cultures in curriculum design and instruction. This should include issues of language, cultural understandings, learning particularities, etc. There will be need for training educators in cultural sensitivity and diversity, language acquisition, and cultural immersion. It will call for an integration in which educators and persons from other cultural understandings are evenly spread. Integration calls for a mixing of cultural perspective so that the true tapestry of interwoven cultures is brought together to produce a magnificent quilt of educational diversity that is rich and colorful! Freire (2000) helped in this regard when he stated that “Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—rejects communiqués and embodies communication” (p. 74).

Corson “suggests that ‘emancipatory leadership’ is a good way for teachers and administrators to exercise power in contexts of diversity” (p. 15). I suggest, using Corson’s words, if integration is fully considered “everyone’s point of view and interpretation of the world would be consulted [and] everyone’s interests would be taken into account when shaping the dominant narratives through which the distributions of power, position, and privilege were accounted for and justified” (p. 19).

Even though the above discussion centers on public education, it provides insight for the church’s theological education concerns. Diversity is a challenge of relevancy in theological education. Relevancy calls for contextualization of the message and incorporation of redemptive narrative to explain and apply theology within any context. Relevancy takes on specific contexts, regional outlook, and global concerns.

A Theological Response to Postmodernism

(Matthew 9:9-17)

The Master of the Church must be the Redeemer

Postmodernism has become pervasive in society. Individualism has taken center stage in much of our efforts to make a difference in Christendom. The individual, the perusal of knowledge that is listed as not being amoral, the worship of many gods, etc. have become, or are fast becoming expected norms within the church and outside the Church of Christ.

If the church is to be what she needs to be in its program, personnel, and practice, there must be serious deliberation about letting Christ be the master of His Church. If indeed, the Church's mission is a redemptive task, then the Redeemer cannot be a non-entity. The shifting worldview and its implications for ministry is an opportunity to grasp. This postmodern worldview with its hopelessness for humanity and its acceptance of many gods provides for the Church, an opportunity to offer the master of the Church as a master of hope. Some Postmodernist thinking remains wrapped in the philosophy of Hegelianism and maybe more so in the thinking of later followers such as Feuerbach, who assessed religion as a human invention, and Freud, who assessed religion as applicable only for the weak. In the Wikipedia article on "Postmodernism" states,

Some identify . . . [the roots of postmodernism] in the breakdown of Hegelian idealism, and the impact of both World Wars (perhaps even the concept of a World War).

Heidegger and Derrida were influential in re-examining the fundamentals of knowledge, together with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his philosophy of action, Soren Kierkegaard's and Karl Barth's important fideist approach to theology, and even the nihilism of Nietzsche's philosophy (§ 14).

The Master of the Church must be preached, taught, and represented. This can alter the trend of extreme humanism that treats God as an addendum.

The Message of the Church must be Redemption

Transformational ministry through the incarnate Christ now spiritually present is the starting point of ministry for the Church. The new wine of the Kingdom is the message of hope that Christ was manifested in the flesh, excruciatingly suffered, and humiliatingly died, and that this same Christ is presently the hope of the world and the reason for celebration of the potential promise.

The Church's mandate is the message of redemption for both modern and postmodern thinking. The Church cannot afford to hang its head and wallow in ignominy, feeling sorry for herself, and feebly presenting a muffled whimper as representative of the powerful message of redemption through the Master of the Church. The message of redemption must be presented to a dying postmodern world. The message is a transformational message. It meets the need of the heart (the emotions, intellect, and will), it encompasses the body, soul, and spirit (the totality of

the human person), and it includes every dimension of existence (the past, present, and the future).

The Method of the Church must be Relevant

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins”! This is a chilling phrase. There is much talk about relevancy lately. There is the uninformed thinking that anything that is not from the present is not relevant. The assumption is that relevancy cannot be from things of the past. Wrong! Relevancy also has everything to do with the effective application of old truth to speak to the present situation. The method of the church must fit the need of the present. Old wineskins (methods) cannot contain and sustain new wine. New methodology has everything to do with sustainability of kingdom efforts. The Church cannot effectively teach theology with irrelevant methodology. The new wine must be contained in the new methodology. Earle (1966) wrote, “The new wine of Christianity must not be poured into the old wineskins of Judaism. It must have fresh concepts to convey new truths, a fresh language to communicate spiritual ideals“(p. 47).

Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible (1973) clarified the concept of methodology in this way:

Why does Jesus feast whereas John fasted? Luke 9:53-56 gives Jesus answer clearly. His radically new teaching . . . must find new forms of expression- or else the old will be destroyed and the new spoilt. Luke 5:39 is a perceptive comment on human nature- the conservatism which mistrusts anything new (p.481).

The dangerous position for the church is her lack of creativity in using methods that are relevant. The Master, message, and method of the Church can bring about a redemptive relevancy that matches the intensity of the postmodern mind.

Conclusion

So, what does the Church do in a postmodern climate? What are the implications for ministry? What is the importance of relevancy? I propose this:

The doctrine of God must be at the center to combat the individualism of postmodern thinking. The doctrine of truth must be absolute and biblical to combat the relativity of truth in postmodern thinking. The doctrine of knowledge that leads to God and allows us to reflect His character must be presented to offset the tentative nature of postmodern knowledge. The doctrine

of God must be presented to show that God is good, holy, personal, and ruler of all, to combat the postmodern thinking of many gods. Nature must be presented as being created and sustained by God to meet the deconstructive postmodern mind. History must be presented as having purpose and direction. Humanity must be presented as created in the image of God and incorporated with the postmodern thinking that humans are both spiritual and relational. The Church must be presented as the fortress of truth and incorporated with the postmodern thinking that community and familial relationships are important. Mission must be global (theistic view), regional (modern view), and local (postmodern view). In addition, the Church must be optimistic in the midst of the pessimistic outlook of the postmodern mind. Finally, there must be an incessant tension between integrated cultural particularities and biblical truths.

Works Cited

- Alexander, David and Alexander, Pat. (Eds.) (1973) *Eerdmans' handbook to the Bible*. London: Lion Publishing.
- Apple, M.W. & Beane, J.A. (Eds.) (1995). *Democratic schools*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. U.S.A.
- Conference of educators in Trinidad and Tobago* (2004).
- Corson, David (1998). *Changing education for diversity*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Earle, Ralph (1966) *The Wesleyan Bible commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company
- Friere, A.M.A. & Macedo, D. (Eds.) (2000). *The Paulo Friere reader*. The Continuum International Publishing Group, U.S.A.
- NRSV version of the Bible*.
- Oord, T. (2001) "Postmodernism-What is It?" and "Posmodernismo - Qué es eso?" *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 1:2. Retrieved January 19, 2007, from <http://www.nazarene.org/education/didache/volumes/1part2/display.aspx>
- Spaulding, H. W. (2001) "Teaching Ethics in a Postmodern World." And "Enseñando Ética en un Mundo Posmoderno." *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 1:2 Retrieved January 19, 2007, from <http://www.nazarene.org/education/didache/volumes/1part2/display.aspx>
- Weiss, Sharon and Wesley, Karla. "Anthropological theories: A guide prepared by students for students." *Postmodernism*. Retrieved October 14, 2006, from <http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/anthros.htm>
- Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia. "*Postmodernity*". Retrieved December 18, 2006, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernity>