

23

Mission in Postmodern Contexts

Arthur Dück

In the beginning God created heaven, earth, and all there is in it. The perfect creation was soon to experience the Fall. Human beings created as the climax of creation were not satisfied as created beings – they wished to be promoted to Creator status. From Genesis 3 onward we have the great story of God reaching out and going after those he loves and created in his image. His image in humankind was damaged, but not removed altogether. After the Fall humankind would struggle between being created in God's image and the rebellious nature that pulls them away from God's loving purposes.

When people come together and live in community they begin to establish ways of doing things to minimize stress and maximize their efforts. Thus culture is born. Culture again is the product of people created in God's image, but also affected by the Fall. Genesis 4 shows us this ambiguity. Cain murders Abel, and seemingly in search of protection, builds a city (Gen 4:17). Thus, it would appear that the city



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is the result of human rebellion against God. A few verses later we read that the descendants of Cain are those who apparently institute polygamy, indicating that sin affected all aspects of creation. However, unexpectedly, among the same lineage we have potentially a positive outcome: Jabal, the first of those who live in tents and raise livestock; Jubal, the first musician, and Tubal-Cain, who forges metal tools (4:20-21). This emphasis continues throughout Scripture and history. Thus, culture becomes a real challenge: on the one hand it maximizes evil (due to the consequence of the Fall); on the other hand it also potentially creates the greatest good (due to humanity created in God's image). This means culture will always be the source of tension for the church. Which aspects of culture are to be preserved and which should be challenged? Culture, however, is like the air we breathe. We are a product of culture. So, it is very difficult to create a reflecting stance toward our own culture—it simply is—and thus, is hardly questioned.

Culture, however, is always changing. It seems that at times the speed of change is faster or stronger than others, which makes it possible to divide Western society in several stages for analysis.¹ These divisions are not absolute and are also determined by a certain bias, a lens that looks at history from a certain viewpoint. This viewpoint is culturally determined and thus again, very difficult to evaluate objectively.

From Modernity to Postmodernity

The Middle Ages were characterized by a clear hierarchy, with God at the top (as the church viewed him), then the Church with its leaders, then the political leaders, then the people. The Church had a strict control on everything in society. All the arts, sciences and cultures were theoretically geared toward God and the Bible. Since tradition became stronger than Scripture, decisions were not always based on a biblical worldview.

The Reformation broke the control the Church had upon society. It also paved the way for the Enlightenment. Mysticism and superstition could not be allowed any longer. Things needed to be explained on a rational basis. Thus, the pulpit replaced the altar. Whereas this change was needed, since people needed to understand what was being taught about the Bible in their own language and not just imagine the meaning of the rituals practiced by the clergy, with time this also took away the mystical element in worship. When everything becomes rational in the Enlightenment sense, God is put in a box and the key is thrown away.

The Enlightenment took God out of the picture. Whereas in the Middle Ages everything revolved around God, the Bible and the Church, and the famous dictum, “believe in order to understand” was the norm, now “you believe only what you

understand” replaced it. Science became the new god of Western society. The church needed to survive within this cultural change. Whereas Catholic universities were stricter at limiting the findings of their research to their own traditions, Protestant universities seemed to let the boat sail wherever it wished to go. The more conservative Protestant movement needed an answer in order to adapt to these changes in society. The systematization of theology, the rise of a new kind of apologetics, and archeology were a kind of a response toward this new worldview. Nevertheless, without noticing, the church also accepted this worldview. In a sense there was no way out: the need to move away from superstition, from dead rituals and the focus on understanding Scripture all pointed in the same direction. On the other hand, there was also a need to reflect critically upon this culture shift. This reflection seems to have come only a lot later. The church has a hard time anticipating some of the cultural trends and preparing responses for them. Maybe this is because the church as a whole would hardly buy in to a prophetic stance against something that seems so good.

When the gas of the Enlightenment ran out, postmodernity set in. The reaction of Evangelicalism toward this cultural shift was fierce. The negative aspects of this change appalled the church. Some of the main points, like relativism, the loss of meaning, hedonism, pluralism, and immediatism shook the church. There were red lights flashing everywhere. Imminent danger and apostasy would be the destiny of the church that would not take a fierce stand against the “culture of the Antichrist.” Very few were able to read a bit deeper and see that this new culture was not worse, nor better than, the previous one. The church had learned to respond to the Enlightenment, and would have to find answers now toward this new trend. Every culture has elements that reflect God’s image, but also those that reflect our rebellion. It seems though, that the church so easily finds its own culture in the Bible and believes its own tradition equals the Bible.

After a few years the concept of postmodernity became ever more difficult to define.² Some would say this was merely the outcome of modernity, or hypermodernity. Others would call it liquid modernity, or even post-postmodernism or metamodernism. However we define this trend is not the most important.³ What we certainly need to see is that there has been a cultural shift. This shift affects the church and all our evangelistic efforts as well.

The methods we used to evangelize were based upon a certain culture and its epistemology that no longer has the same appeal today. People react in different ways and need to be approached in different ways. A case in point is described by John Burke who was evangelizing on a College campus. Burke presented the gospel with logical steps trying to get Chris to make a commitment of faith. Chris reacted

positively toward the presentation of the gospel so that Burke believed it was time to push for a decision. Chris' reaction surprised him. Chris said that the gospel certainly made sense to Burke, but would not work for him. In other words: what works for you will not work for me. Burke replied that if it was true and made sense, it was also for him. Chris replied: "You know, I guess I just don't want to be like you." Burke comments that this answer has not left him.⁴

What does this story tell us? Before digging deeper into evangelism in today's context, we will look briefly at the Brazilian context where I minister.

The Brazilian Context

Brazil never really was affected that much by the Enlightenment. The colonization of Brazil began right after the Portuguese ships "discovered" the new southern continent. Brazil was colonized by a country unaffected by the Reformation. Medieval Catholicism mixed with the folk beliefs of the Arabs that had lived for centuries in Portugal was the predominant value system of the colonizers. In addition, the Jesuits, a product of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, were the missionaries to the indigenous peoples. By the system of patronage, the King of Portugal was responsible to evangelize the Brazilian people – in other words, he became the pope of the Brazilian church. The Jesuits, however, were subject to the Pope in Rome. This created a situation full of religious and economic conflicts in the country. In addition, the miscegenation with the native peoples, including their animism, and with the African slaves who brought their own religious pantheon, created a Catholic country dominated by folk beliefs and syncretism.

Since Brazil was a colony, all the valuable resources went to Portugal, who with the riches from abroad did not really care about industrial production – they purchased most of their products from England. In addition, no industry was allowed in Brazil. Initially, education was attached to the Jesuits, then later to the government within the Christendom model. In the nineteenth century however, many intellectuals went over to France, with several Brazilian students bringing some of the Enlightenment ideals back to Brazil. These, however, only took hold in the few universities in the country. The Brazilian people as a whole were never really that much affected by that worldview.

With the advent of communication technologies in the last decades of the twentieth century however, the values of postmodern western societies came into the country at a rapid speed. Several of these values were similar to the Brazilian version of the Middle Ages. Religious beliefs were centered on God, the Bible, and Jesus, but were very flexible, since the mixture of indigenous and African gods (brought in

through slave traffic), and the Catholic saints are also included the “official Brazilian religion”: (folk) Catholicism. Tolerance for different beliefs was already in place, as long as the rituals of the Catholic Church were practiced, or at least not opposed. Until the sixties over 90% of the population would have considered themselves Catholic, but mostly nominal Catholic. Since then the percentage has fallen and now is around 65% Catholic, with an outstanding growth of the evangelicals, who today are close to 25% of the population.

The Protestant church was born with missionaries coming from Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, North America began sending missionaries to Latin America and mostly dominated theological training and the publishing companies with a fundamentalist flavor. Since the colonizers were more concerned with heretics entering the continent than with diseases, the first century of Protestant presence was marked by ostracism from the population and mild persecution in some regions, and therefore a sectarian stance toward other faiths, mainly the Catholic Church. This, together with the fundamentalist bent created among Brazilian Protestants an attitude of “whatever is not *like us* is wrong.” Our evangelistic efforts with the mostly Catholic population were very aggressive: we would confront them with truth – “they are idol worshippers (they used images of the saints in church and in their homes) and Mary takes the place of Jesus in their religion.” Basically we would not even attempt to relate to people. We were so sure that we had all the truth, and they were in error, that we believed that once they heard our truth, they certainly would want to become like us.

In addition to the fundamentalist emphasis on the gospel alone and definitely no social gospel, Liberation Theology pushed the evangelicals to underscore even more the proclamation and distance themselves from any involvement with social issues. This picture began to change in the mid-nineties. Some Brazilian evangelical leaders began to see that we could and should have a different attitude toward people of other beliefs. We should relate to them before we could share the gospel effectively. While several churches are going in this direction, there are still many who are not, and who continue to have a strong militant approach to evangelism—we need to bring these enemies toward our side.

Evangelizing People within this New Setting

Evangelistic methods are culturally determined. And this is rightly so, at least in part. We need to speak the language of the people, and we need to communicate in ways they might understand the gospel. If in an Enlightenment culture, evangelism focused more on a rational presentation of arguments attesting the divinity of Christ,

this does not work as well anymore in a relativistic context. We need other approaches to present Christ to a post-Christian culture.

Often the missionaries of the past were criticized for taking the gospel tied to Western culture toward the mission field and that the cultural element might have been stronger than the gospel itself. This criticism is at least partially true. However, the interesting aspect is that we hardly look at our own evangelistic methods, nor apply the same critique toward them. We are sure that our methods are biblical and if they are not inspired in the same sense as the Bible, they certainly are close to that. But is that true? Is the presentation of the truth in the Enlightenment sense the presentation of the biblical gospel? Do we want to win people to the church-culture that was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment? Paul Hiebert reminds us: “Our desire is not to win arguments but to persuade people to follow Christ. Our witness must be incarnational in nature. We must go where people are, speak their language, and become one with them as far as our consciences allow and we are psychologically able. People need to hear the gospel in their heart language and see it lived in us.”⁵ The problem is that we frequently connect the method, not with our own culture, but with the Bible. So we believe the way to bring people to the gospel has a certain method of several steps and that is the right way to do it.

But is the gospel predominantly propositional? Enlightenment church-culture certainly would say yes. Must the cultures that are more relational, and consequently the people born in the postmodern context, become predominantly propositional in order to understand the gospel? John Burke thinks not:

“Fundamentally, truth is not primarily propositional, but personal. Jesus said, “I am the truth...” The best way to help emerging generations find truth is to introduce them to him.... Generally, emerging generations do not ask, “What is true?” They are primarily asking, “Do I want to be like you?” In other words, they see truth as relational. “If I want to be like you, then I want to consider what you believe. If I don’t see anything real or attractive in you or your friends as Christ-followers, I don’t care how true you think it is, I’m not interested.”⁶

Certainly we can go too far as to remove the propositional element of Scripture. This would be deadly for the gospel. But we definitely should question if we did not go too far in our propositional approach. The new generations wish to see the gospel working in the lives of people, not just propositional truth statements. That is where Jesus becomes so important. Even though Brazil never came to the point of living in the Enlightenment mode, the evangelical churches have been strongly influenced

by some of its elements (those supported by fundamentalism). It is sad to see that Paul has become more important than Jesus. The preaching of Epistles has by far outnumbered the teaching of the Gospels in those churches that we would consider biblically sound.

Since we live in a culture where relationships are so important, there is a need to come back to Jesus.⁷ We need to re-read the Gospels and find the Jesus of Scripture, who certainly will challenge the Jesus of our church-tradition. He became one of us, lived in our culture, was influenced by it, and needed to communicate in word and in deed so that people could know God and his purposes for them. We are however, not only talking about content, but also about methodology. Again Burke reminds us that,

“Even though Jesus had all the answers, he still respected and valued the opinions and free will of others. He often asked questions to get people to search rather than just telling the answer. He taught in parables to pique spiritual curiosity of those truly seeking... Because of all the baggage and lack of trust in our post-Christian world, people need to be engaged in dialogue... If they listen to a message in church, they want to process it. They need to question it and wrestle with it... Creating a culture of dialogue means becoming people who truly respect and value all people as worthy of the love and sacrifice Christ demonstrated. It means being willing to respect their thoughts and opinions, making sure they know we value them, even if we differ in belief. An atmosphere of dialogue requires us to take into account the perspective of the other person, seeking to understand her position as much as we want her to understand ours. It is other-centered communication. It creates a two-way street of conversation. This kind of environment respects the free will of individuals and helps people not be afraid of offending us in their exploration and questioning.”⁸

This approach ties in with the way the “other” has been viewed by the church and culture as a whole. In an excellent article Paul Hiebert shows us how the “other” was seen in history. In the Middle Ages, the “others” were monsters, infidels, heretics, descendants of Cain, etc.⁹ In the Age of Discoveries, they were considered savages, pagans, immature children. Then the Enlightenment thought of the “other” as primitive, unenlightened ancestors. Today they are considered native, inscrutable, etc. These characterizations of the “other” will not help us in our holistic mission. We were all created in God’s image. If these notions continue of the “other,” reconciliation will not occur. We are all brothers and sisters and need to learn from each other, even

though we know that the cultural differences between us create barriers that take time to bridge. I am not advocating relativism, where everything goes and we basically learn from the experiences of other people. But we also have to avoid looking at the other as an “object” to be evangelized, to have better statistics.

Point of Contact

In the past our conversation with those outside the church had mostly a top-down approach. We had the truth and believed people were eager to know the truth and if we could give them the best arguments, they surely would embrace our faith. Thus we would begin with Christ and confront people with the need for a decision: yes or no. This, however, is frequently perceived as an “I am better than you” approach. In addition, because of the strong emphasis on the truth element and the “this or that” approach we understood Jesus as the judge and hell as outcome of the wrong decision people would take. While Jesus certainly is the judge and people need to decide to whom they will give their allegiance and this decision has very long-lasting outcomes, this is not even how Jesus approached people. Jesus utilized this approach only with the religious leaders who intentionally opposed him, even knowing that he had come from God (John 3).

In addition, using this approach showed that we were aware of the consequences of our rebellion against God (the Fall), but not very aware of being created in his image and likeness, and that although this image was affected, some elements of God’s image nevertheless are still present in us. Thus, in using Jesus and the cross to begin our conversation with those outside the faith, this closed the door for further conversations and the possibility of getting to know the Christ. If Christ separates people, and he even admitted that would happen (Luke 12:51), we need to start at a different place in order to build a relationship that may point outsiders to Christ.

We are all created in God’s image, so creation is what we have in common, and that is a good point to begin, since creation points to the Creator. This could be called a “point of contact.” Alister McGrath defines point of contact as a starting point for God’s revelation. It is a catalyst, but not a substitute for divine revelation. God shows who he is in revelation, but this revelation has already been prepared where God will give of himself. This point of contact does not anticipate, nor make revelation unnecessary, it simply makes it more efficient when it occurs.¹⁰

This point of contact is important, because it creates the platform for outsiders to hear the gospel. On the other hand, it points to general revelation that does not reveal everything about God – without the special revelation people cannot be saved. However, in a post-Christian society, special revelation has no credibility, and thus

will not create a platform for a healthy dialogue. If the message does not come across, the Good News of salvation cannot be heard. That is why we need contextualization, which will always raise eyebrows. Lesslie Newbigin explains:

“Everyone with the experience of cross-cultural mission knows that there are always two opposite dangers, the Scylla and Charybdis, between which one must steer. On the one side there is the danger that one finds no point of contact for the message as the missionary preaches it, to the people of the local culture the message appears irrelevant and meaningless. On the other side is the danger that the point of contact determines entirely the way that the message is received, and the result is syncretism. Every missionary path has to find the way between these two dangers: irrelevance and syncretism. And if one is more afraid of one danger than the other, one will certainly fall into the opposite.”¹¹

It is far safer to maintain the gospel within our own church-culture, which means the gospel becomes captive to our methods and our worldview, in other words, our cultural understanding of the gospel. But history has shown that this often brings more culture than gospel to the lost. To contextualize the gospel into other cultures must always deal with the danger of syncretism.¹² When the gospel enters another culture it needs to clothe itself with cultural forms in order to be understood. These cultural forms are not neutral – they bring with them levels of meaning that are cannot be brought across by the limitations of vocabulary. When we present Christ to a different culture, we must be aware that what people understand is not exactly what is in our mind, sometimes even very far from what we thought we were conveying.¹³ This means that the contextualizing process can never end. In an ever-changing culture, words and concepts change rapidly and the church needs to find ways to communicate the unchangeable message to outsiders so they might grasp it in their ever-changing categories.

Since “truth” immediately closes the door for the presentation of the gospel, but cannot be left out, what alternative do we have? McGrath suggest that instead of asking if the Christian faith is “true” we might ask people if it is “believable.” This might open the doors for conversation and diminish the biases against the Christian faith.¹⁴ In this dialogue, certainly the truth of the gospel will need to be addressed, but it should not be the beginning of the conversation. Starting there in most cases ends the conversation.

For some people this certainly may seem like a step back in our evangelistic efforts, since it is perceived as watering down the gospel and adopting relativism.

But this might not be so. It is establishing a point of contact, where the biases can be slowly deconstructed and the gospel might reach outsiders through relationships. McGrath illustrates this point with a story of Greek mythology.

“Homer mentions mermaids that sang so seductively that sailors would leave their duties and so their boats were destroyed. Ulysses protected his sailors by stuffing the ears of the sailors so they would not be seduced by their singing. However, Orpheus proposed another alternative. He played the lyre so well that his music was a stronger attraction than the mermaids’ singing.”¹⁵

We can present the gospel in such a manner that people will be attracted to it. This means we relate to them before we present truth. This creates an opening so others might listen to us. We serve the needs of the people to create a point of contact. When the doors are open, people in need will know where to look for help when God creates in them the desire for a new life.

Our stance toward defending the truth of the gospel should never lead us to equate “the other” as those who defend the lie of relativism and as such are to be defeated. This does not mean that we will avoid the truth issue, but that we will need to present it in a different way. Bruce Ellis Benson gives an interesting suggestion:

“The Christian can only offer them [the teachings of Christ] in a spirit of deep humility, precisely because they are examples of being truly humble, of being dependent upon one another, of loving even those who do not love us back. Of course, even these examples must be offered up in political discourse only in a spirit of respect and with willingness to dialogue with the other... The point is that, rather than start by focusing on me, the focus begins on the other. Of course, this is fully in line with what Jesus says. His injunctions are what one does in response to the other—whether the widow, the stranger, the enemy, or the one who demands one’s clothing. In regard to these last two, Jesus in effect says “do the opposite of what you would be inclined to do”—instead of hating in return, love; instead of resisting the demand, give freely of even that which is not demanded. In not responding in kind, one changes the entire structure of the relation: it is now structured by love.”¹⁶

Dialogue and contextualization are loaded words. But we have no alternative. Either we go to where the people are, or they will not hear the gospel. Jesus’ incarnation gives us the right model for it. The change from the Old Testament to

the New Testament is not just a fuller revelation of propositions and teaching – it is Jesus showing who God is and how to live a God-pleasing life. Jesus clothed himself with our limitations so he could save us. He calls us not only to worship him, but to follow in his footsteps. This is the way to go. We need more models than methods. We need people who live missionally among this culture, people who struggle with contextualization, who are willing to speak the language of the people, relate to them so that they might be reached. But this alone would be too individualistic. We need small groups, even churches that will live missionally, modeling the gospel among a culture that yearns for something that it cannot find except in Jesus.

We need to be missionally minded, then live missional lives, opening doors for the missional message to reach people through our words. The normal sequence in today's culture is this one, but situations are so varied, it might be the other way round. Nevertheless, the light needs to shine in the darkness. The church is called to be in the world. This means it will constantly struggle with not adopting worldly values, but it dare not isolate itself from the world, since it forgets its own calling, and history has shown that a light when it does not shine in the darkness loses its own light.

Notes

- ¹ For an analysis of the missionary movement applying Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).
- ² A full-blown definition of postmodernity is virtually impossible. This is because there is considerable disagreement about what modernity really means. Nevertheless, at least a preliminary definition is needed. Os Guinness summarizes postmodern thinking in this way: "Where modernism was a manifesto of human self-confidence and self-congratulation, postmodernism is a confession of modesty, if not despair. There is no truth, only truths. There are no principles, only preferences. There is no grand reason, only reasons. There is no privileged civilization, only a multiple of cultures, beliefs, periods, and styles. There is no grand narrative of human progress, only countless stories of where people and their cultures are now. There is no simple reality or any grand objectivity of universal, detached knowledge, only a ceaseless representation of everything in terms of everything else. In sum, postmodernism...is an extreme form of relativism." In *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1994), 105.
- ³ I do not mean that studying authors like Grenz, Veith and others is not important, but there is not room to discuss the philosophic changes that occurred in this chapter. What I wish to emphasize is that there are changes and we need to take them seriously.

- ⁴ John Burke. *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You are Culture in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 36-37.
- ⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism," *Missiology: An International Review*, XIX:3 (1991): 273.
- ⁶ Burke, *No Perfect People*, 42-43.
- ⁷ There are many reflections about the need to get back to Jesus as a model for our lives and not only heed his teachings. See readings below by Frost, Hirsch, and McKnight.
- ⁸ Burke, *No Perfect People*, 53-54.
- ⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, "Are We Our 'Others' Keepers?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 22 (1995): 325-337.
- ¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Apologética Cristã no Século XXI. Ciência e Arte com Integridade* (São Paulo, Brazil: Vida, 2008), 22.
- ¹¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 67.
- ¹² This indicates the real danger of under-contextualizing and over-contextualizing. The dangers are real and affect all involved in transmitting the gospel. As Newbigin reminds us, you tend to fall into one or the other ditch, and ditches on both sides have similar features, although we only see the other ditch as the nasty one. Hiebert's approach toward contextualization should always be kept in mind.
- ¹³ When the gospel entered the Greco-Roman world it was perceived in ways that were different from the Jewish context where it was born. The struggle to understand the gospel will be with us forever. Thus we need to dialogue with people from other theological orientations and different cultures to get closer to the biblical gospel. We need to dialogue with the people of the culture where they are at, not where we would like them to be.
- ¹⁴ McGrath, *Apologética*, 313.
- ¹⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God, and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 178.
- ¹⁶ Bruce Ellis Benson, "Radical democracy, radical Christianity," *Political Theology* 10:2 (2009), 53.

Recommended Reading

- Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991.
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- Newbigin, Lesslie. *A Word in Season*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Veith Jr. Gene E. *Tempos pós-modernos: Uma avaliação cristã do pensamento e da cultura da nossa época*. São Paulo: Cultura Cristã, 1999.

Study Questions

1. Is your culture more pre-modern, modern, or post-modern? Or is it in transition from one to the other? Give examples of these worldviews in your culture.
2. What have been your experiences of late, or those of others, in presenting the gospel using a “propositional truth” approach as explained in this chapter?
3. Give two concrete examples of what a meaningful “point of contact” could be. How can churches establish collective points of contact with their communities?