

Outline some of the Central Themes of a Postmodern Worldview. What are the Implications of these for the Practice of Evangelism Today?

In the global context postmodernism, and therefore a postmodern worldview, is a western issue. Yet even within western thought there are marked differences between continental and Anglo-American expressions of whatever it is.¹ ‘Whatever it is,’ because to define it is difficult, because within postmodernism definitions are unstable, temporary and easily contradicted and because ‘whatever’ seems to describe the spirit of it so well.

A worldview is a way of describing how an individual or society views the context it finds itself in. It answers the questions who are we, where are we, what is wrong, what is the solution, who or what is God and what is the basis for morality?² A postmodern worldview is thus one that describes the views of individuals and society within postmodernity. As the prefix ‘post’ suggests, ‘postmodern’ is contrasted with something that has gone before – modernity, and to define ‘postmodern’ is impossible without exploring its relationship to and contrast with modernity.

I will begin by defining postmodernity (how modern!), look at some of the key tenets of modernity and then draw out some of the central themes/manifestations of a postmodern worldview and their implications for evangelism before concluding with some broad responses. I am taking for this essay evangelism to be ‘that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.’³

¹ Grenz SJ, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) p19-20

² Greene C, *Lecture Notes* (Cliff College, 2002) for the first four questions and Storkey E, *Evangelism and Postmodernism* (Go Tell 2 Conference, 2001) has in addition the last two questions.

³ Abraham WJ, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) p.95

“‘Postmodern’ is a vague and often contested term.”⁴ One newspaper even advised it’s readers that ‘postmodern’ has no meaning and they should therefore use it as often as possible!⁵ It is a new era, an emerging paradigm of history. It is not a fad⁶, although it has yet to bring in any comprehensive definition of reality.⁷ It is building on modernity’s gains and beginning to transcend some of its failings. Postmodern is a many splendoured thing viewed by some as the mode of production of late capitalism, or a new mode of activity, or something of sinister influence. It is viewed by some as an essentially new thing whereas others doubt its existence.⁸

Grenz helpfully points out where there are areas of unity or where the term ‘postmodern’ can best be understood, namely in the stringent criticism of modernity and that radical surgery is needed to correct modernity’s ills. The tentative sketching of what the emerging paradigm of postmodernity will look like is where disunity is to be found.⁹ This means one can only say at best what postmodernism has come from and what it reacts against and accept that postmodernity at the moment is like an emerging cultural atmosphere, which still includes aspects of modernity rather than a neatly defined worldview. Grenz also questions whether it is possible to have a ‘postmodern worldview’ since for postmoderns there is a denial of the reality of a unified world as the object of our perception.¹⁰

Regardless of what it is, at this level of discussion the implication of postmodernity and a postmodern worldview for evangelism is that we must recognise we are in significantly

⁴ Ammerman NT, ‘Just what is Postmodernity and what difference does it make to people of faith?’ *Growing up Postmodern* (The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth Church and Culture) p11

⁵ Cited in Sampson P ‘The Rise of Postmodernity’ Sampson P, Samuel V & Sugden C (ed), *Faith and Modernity* (Oxford, Regnum Books, 1997) p29

⁶ Thwaites J, *The Church Beyond the Congregation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999) p49

⁷ Ibid p23

⁸ Sampson in Sampson etc cites various authors p29

⁹ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism* p21

¹⁰ Grenz SJ, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Michigan, William B Eerdmans, 1996) p40

changing times. The current or accepted means of evangelism may no longer be appropriate or effective. In my view the culture of church, particularly evangelical expressions of it, is closely wed to modernity and therefore its evangelistic methods are strongly influenced by modernity. This means that practitioners of evangelism must evaluate their methods and face up to the challenge of taking the gospel to a radically different emerging culture compared to that which has gone before. Especially given that 'our task as Christ's disciples is to embody and articulate the never-changing good news of available salvation in a manner that the emerging generation can understand.'¹¹

Modernity can be characterised by progress and an optimism that this could lead to a better world. This progress would come from the relentless advance of technology and knowledge since the Enlightenment. A key feature of modernity is secular rationality.¹² This led to science removing the mysteries of understanding and gaps in knowledge, which in turn saw religious concerns separated into a specialised compartment within the world, since priests were no longer the dispensers of approved knowledge.¹³ Individualism also flourished under modernity contributing to a pervading atmosphere of pluralism and tolerance. Lyotard¹⁴ defined modern as any science that legitimised itself with reference to a metadiscourse by making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative (an overarching story from which we derive meaning). Pluralism and relativism have continued into postmodernism, whereas rational thought as the only means to gain knowledge, or the idea that knowledge/truth objectively exists and the optimism in modernity's progress are being left at the entrance to this new emerging paradigm.

¹¹ Grenz *Primer* p174

¹² Marty ME 'Youth between late modernity and postmodernity' *Growing up Postmodern* (The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth Church and Culture) p34

¹³ Ammerman NT, 'Just what is Postmodernity and what difference does it make to people of faith?' *Growing up Postmodern* (The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth Church and Culture) p12f

¹⁴ Lyotard J-F, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) pxxiii

We can now look at some of the central themes of a postmodern worldview.¹⁵

No Fixed Point of Reference

Sampson¹⁶ asserts that there is no fixed point of reference within a postmodern worldview. Objective knowledge no longer accepted as a possibility. It is not possible to be a neutral observer looking in at any given situation since we all bring our own stories that colour what we think. (Perhaps the postmodern alternative to objectivity is a kind of neutral subjectivity!) Because there is no fixed point of reference there is a sense of parody, irony and playfulness within the postmodern worldview. This poses a challenge for evangelism in that church is often viewed as an institution that takes itself too seriously, which for a postmodern worldview could be a barrier to receiving the gospel.

Lyotard¹⁷ asserts that postmodernity simply put is ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (The grand narratives of the metadiscourse referred to above). Whereas modernity saw competition between these overarching stories to see which one was true and success being determined by the most logical arguments, postmodernity is made up of many ‘local truths’, taking the relativism of modernity on still further. In the words of the Manic Street Preachers, a pop band, ‘Show me your truth and I’ll show you mine.’ This is combined with an acceptance that reason is no longer the sole arbiter of what is true and real.

This in turn raises significant implications for evangelism. Firstly, apologetic methods are called into question. If someone with a postmodern worldview does not believe there are overarching truths, and apologetics is the defence of overarching truths then an evangelist

¹⁵ With all the caveats above, that it is emerging etc. and so for the sake of putting it together as a world view, here goes!

¹⁶ Sampson ‘Rise of Postmodernity’ p39

¹⁷ Lyotard *Postmodern Condition* pxxiv

using apologetics is no longer even competing on the same playing field. Evangelists no longer need to convince people of things like whether it is 'reasonable to believe' since they are questions not being asked. We need to rediscover mystery and the arts as a means of communication to the postmodern worldview. A further challenge, despite an obvious temptation, is not to respond by *postmodernising* our faith into a local truth, since we do believe in a metanarrative. Another way to engage on this issue is to allow our own local story, our testimony, and our experience of the metanarrative of the gospel, to be the means of engagement acting as a bridge to the full gospel.

A postmodern worldview is often parodied as a cynical worldview. Since there is no fixed point of reference, cynicism towards claims of absolute truth is a natural progression. Cynicism is just one aspect though. Dispensers of absolute truth claims are viewed as those attempting to control others and have power over them which leads further still to a suspicion of authority. Accordingly, propositional and purely verbal presentations of the gospel are inadequate. Show me, don't tell me would be the postmodern worlds response. This partly relates to consumerism (more below) and what works but also calls for an incarnational approach to sharing the gospel. Evangelists must embody rather than merely verbalise the gospel message, which means integrity is important (as a disarming force of cynicism) as well as communicating and demonstrating a gospel that impacts with where people are and involves more than their minds. A message of Good News that reaches their disappointment, recognising they are no longer convinced of the optimism and triumph that modernity heralded. Willimon¹⁸ describes how the people of postmodernity are reluctant to make promises in a world where many promises to them have been broken. An active promise of discipleship to Christ is thus difficult to extract.

¹⁸ Willimon W 'Imitating Christ in a postmodern world: Young Disciples today' *Growing up Postmodern* (The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth Church and Culture) p86

Perhaps the response is to make following Jesus as accessible as possible. Not by watering down the gospel but by creating a culture of discipleship where conversion is the beginning rather than the end of a process and being more 'centred set' rather than 'bounded set' in our outlook. This means discipleship and belonging to the community of faith is about moving towards the centre (Christ) rather than jumping a series of hurdles (often moral standards) before entering the community. (These hurdles are the boundaries referred to by 'bounded' set) In practice allowing someone to belong before believing and behaving rather than believe, behave and then belong.

A further implication for evangelism is how this relates to perceptions of church. Drane argues that church is viewed as being part of the 'problem' due to its close association with modernity.¹⁹ The message of the church is therefore not viewed as a solution. Instead it is associated with an institution and an authoritarian one at that. This means that we must reimagine church. Not discard it, since it is Christ's bride, but recognise that what is often church is a child of modernity. It's thought patterns, culture, priorities, message, signs, symbols and practices are inaccessible and not attractive or accessible to a postmodern person. Given that the church is the sender of the evangelist, the corporate witness to Christ and the nurturing environment of new entrants to the Kingdom it is imperative that it changes - soon, fast and creatively.

Consumerism

Cray asserts that even sociologists who resist the term 'postmodern' describe the new shape of society as being centred on consumerism.²⁰ A postmodern worldview is a consumer worldview, driven by a consumer society. Similar to the vagueness of definition of

¹⁹ Drane J, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000) p95

²⁰ Cray G, *Postmodern Culture and Youth Discipleship* (Cambridge, Grove Books, 1998) p4

postmodernism, Fine and Leopold caution that precise and meaningful definitions of consumer society are as rare as the use of the term is common.²¹ Nevertheless, I will draw out elements of what this means.

Sampson²² describes how postmodernity is a culture of consumption since everything is viewed as a consumer item including knowledge, meaning, truth and spirituality. Cray asserts that the prime value of this consumer society is personal choice. He cites an example of how the issue is not if Christianity is true but rather whether it 'worked' and therefore whether it warranted a good consumer choice. A more fundamental issue is raised by this though, one of identity in crisis. Cray says that since the grand narrative of progress has been rejected it has been replaced with individual consumer choice. This means that each of us is alone since the only story we have in common is the consumer one. We are ourselves are items of consumption. Consumed by mass media efforts to market products to us but also consumed by ourselves. Modernity's quest for knowledge included a quest for the true inner self. This has been abandoned by postmodernity. There is no longer a subject in the self rather only one on the shelf. We choose who we want to be, this can change, be inconsistent – it doesn't matter whether it's authentic but we choose who we are says the postmodern worldview. Is it any wonder that a postmodern worldview is also characterised by a crisis of confidence and self esteem?

Another aspect of consumerism impacting on identity is how time relates to a postmodern person. Modernity was built on the belief that humankind had the perpetual ability to create a better world and future. Postmodernity rejects this and instead has uncertainty, irony and scepticism of the future, which combined with a failure to discover a rootedness in the past

²¹ Fine B & Leopold E, *World of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1993) p62

²² Sampson p31

leaves the present as the only thing to be sure of.²³ How does evangelism respond? The gospel message certainly has the answer, an identity and faith rooted in the history of the past with a hope in the future. How to get a culture to accept it is the challenge. The answer I believe can be found through community.

We could view these aspects of postmodernity as a threat but I see them as a great opportunity for evangelism. Willimon²⁴ says that we (evangelists/communicators of the gospel) do well when people out there know something is missing and they look for a richer description of the world. Drane quotes Coupland, the archetypal postmodern author, who says ‘My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone.’²⁵ People are desperate to find God, to experience God. The harvest is ripe, yet are the labourers few because we are enmeshed in our own trivialities, or mounting a rearguard action against the sweeping tide of a culture viewed with hostility? We are designed to live in community, we can not exist outside our own set of social relationships, made in the image of God – trinity, community, is it any wonder then that the acute individualism of the postmodern worldview is shown wanting? In order to effectively communicate the Gospel to a postmodern worldview it needs to be embodied and demonstrated by a community of God’s people. One that knows it’s past, anticipates it’s future and in the present is a genuine and practical community of grace, healing, hope and faith. Thereby demonstrating something that works, but more than that, something that lifts us above the potential despair of postmodernity into the destiny we have in Christ.

The emphasis on consumer choice significantly exaggerates relativism within the postmodern worldview since it is my right to choose whatever I want. When combined with tolerance

²³ Cray p6-7

²⁴ Willimon p87

anything seen to proclaim absolutes is seen as an attempt to abuse power. I have already argued that our challenge is not to bow to this pressure since we believe in a metanarrative, something more than relative truth. Relativism is seen as the enemy of the gospel in postmodernism, but again I see it as an opportunity. Relativism can not be held in the extreme because it cannot answer the 'why' question: Why is x wrong, deplorable or right? Why is also an issue of purpose: why do we do what we do? These are spiritual questions and as Newbiggin pointed out, 'The human spirit cannot live permanently with the form of rationality which has no answer to the question "why?"'²⁶ The gospel message has answers to the why questions – why is there suffering, why do we exist etc.? The implications for the postmodern worldview on evangelism in this context are that we provide answers to these questions that will be inevitably asked if Newbiggin is right, and I think he is.

The consumer aspect of the postmodern worldview also has implications on the 'how' of evangelism. It would be easy to respond by marketing the message better – give the people what they want to hear, in a way they want to hear it. Veith²⁷ develops this contrasting the preaching of feel good messages with those that lead to the conviction of sin and salvation through the cross of Jesus. However, I believe his argument shows a limit in his thinking even though it is not the point he is making. He suggests to me that valid evangelistic preaching is limited to you have sinned, you need to repent, the only way to heaven is through Jesus and sign here please. I agree that it would be an unhealthy compromise to never talk of sin if that were his definition of 'feel good'. However, he implies that when it comes to the crunch God's story can be compressed to a bite sized view of history, comparable to the four spiritual laws of campus crusade, when actually a postmodern person needs to see that the story of God is so much fuller, richer and connects with so much more of their story.

²⁵ Drane p103

²⁶ Newbiggin L, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 2000) p213

In response to the central themes of the postmodern worldview Grenz proposes four helpful ways that the gospel needs to be embodied answering the implications raised for evangelism. They group together in a different way my solutions elsewhere in this paper.²⁸ They are Post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic and post-noeticentric. Post-individualistic includes responses to the rejection of objectivity, the need for community and the nature of that community. Post-rationalistic is his response to the 'elevation of reason' during modernity. Post-dualistic responds to the separation of mind and matter. He says the gospel must speak to human beings in their entirety. The biblical view he says, is that our identity is made up of our relationships to nature, to others, to God and to ourselves. Post-noeticentric means that the goal of our existence is more than the accumulation of knowledge and therefore commitment to Christ is more than an intellectual endeavour. It is about transforming character and renewing lives. I find Grenz's typology useful but I believe it still panders to the modern influences upon his planned readership – e.g. the church, that they would need overarching themes, definitions and solutions. Ironically therefore it exposes the extent to which the church is entrenched in modernity and needs to change.

I have illustrated what the postmodern worldview is. A view that rejects certain aspects of modernity, such as the elevation of reason and hope in progress, and takes others further such as relativism and pluralism. It is a fluid worldview with no fixed points of reference, a view built around consumption rather than production. As a result those who hold to this worldview have a fundamental crisis of identity. The implications raised for evangelism are how best to communicate the gospel to this rapidly changing culture in the west. I have proposed solutions – to the crisis of identity, community; to the rejection of reason, the rediscovery of mystery. I have demonstrated how some methods are now less important such

²⁷ Veith GE, *Guide to Contemporary Culture* (Leicester: Crossway Books, 1994) p213

²⁸ Grenz *Primer* p167f

as apologetics. I hope too, to have given a brief clue as to what I see are the prophetic challenges ahead. Challenges of building genuine community, of creatively and boldly re-imagining church and how to communicate the gospel.

My concern is that in moving towards postmodernism these challenges will simply become ironic clichés of what should be done, of what we think we are doing and actually of what we don't. I hope this is not the case.

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Abbreviations

BRF – Bible Reading Fellowship

IVP – Inter Varsity Press

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