

POSTSCRIPT

Anyone who has gone to Sunday school for any period of time knows that certain subjects and topics come around like clockwork. We can count on a lesson about the birth of Jesus at Christmas regardless of the topic of the lessons around that time. We will always study the Resurrection at Easter. On a regular basis we look at the parables of Jesus and the story of the Exodus. Anyone using a planned curriculum will make it through the Bible every six years or so. This approach assures a general familiarity with the Bible, if not a depth of understanding.

During the spring, my Sunday school class studied the life of King David with attention to its contemporary application. I finished writing this book Saturday night, and Sunday morning we started a new series. We will not study a book of the Bible or a Bible character. For the next three months we will study the meaning of a biblical worldview. Worldview has never been a part of the Bible study cycle. Until ten years ago, very few people even discussed the subject. That a denominational press would break out of the lesson mold and address the subject, however, gives me great cause for hope.

In the past, only philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and missionaries talked about worldview. Scholars discussed it from the detached perspective of uninvolved observation. Missionaries, on the other hand, studied worldview because they were entering a world vastly different from the one they had left. It was necessary for them to understand the worldview of the culture into which they were going in order to communicate.

Like a fish unaware of the water in which it swims, most people are unaware of the worldview through which they make sense of life. They have never known any other way of thinking. We take a worldview for granted

because it is always there. It is like the operating system of a computer. It lies hidden behind the day-to-day applications. Worldview represents “what everybody knows.” Because it lies so deep rooted, we assume everyone else thinks the same way we do and understands the meaning of life and the universe from the same perspective we have.

Postmodernity represents a worldview in disarray. Postmodernity does not present a unified picture of the world. In a sense, it only offers a path of least resistance for a generation that did not have the benefit of nurture from its culture. A person acquires a worldview through personal acquaintance with people who hold the worldview. Postmodernity is not so much the collection of positive affirmations normally found in any worldview. Rather, postmodernity is the vacuum that occurs when no one is around to raise a child.

This book has explored various dimensions of postmodernity. A few pure postmodern people may exist in the wild, but it would be a mistake to think that all of these categories apply to everyone within a given age range or who live in a given geographical area. A person may have quite traditional views about universal truth, but have a nontraditional view by Western standards of what constitutes truth. They may be highly rationalistic in some areas of their life while being quite soppy in other areas. Even the person who does not want a fragmented life may successfully function as though only what can be known empirically can exist and at the same time hold deep spiritual views about the nonphysical world. In other words, many patterns exist for how postmodernity plays itself out. For that reason, Christians cannot come up with the perfect method or presentation of the gospel to fit all postmodern people. The effort to come up with the perfect canned approach to reach postmodern people with the gospel misses the point altogether.

Postmodern people need individual attention. Fortunately, Christ designed the church to give individual attention to people. Of course, you have to ignore the organizational structure of the denomination, the programmatic emphases of the local congregations, and the annual report of the church nominating committee for all of the committee and teaching responsibilities. All of this necessary clutter represents our “improvement” on the original design, but what Christ gave us is much simpler. We are a body of believers in whom he individually dwells bound together by his Spirit by which he makes us corporately one. In the course of life not covered by the organizational structure, program, and nominating committee report we have our opportunity to give individual attention to people.

Last Thursday night my family drove to Nashville to hear a very old man preach at the new Titans stadium. Two men helped Billy Graham make his way to the pulpit where he told about Jesus Christ. At the end of the service,

a river of people emptied the stands and filled up the playing field. I had seen this same thing happen in Portland, Oregon, a decade ago and in Washington, D.C., almost a decade earlier. If you watch the people as they come forward, you will notice that few single individuals respond. In most cases two or three people come together. The most famous mass evangelist in history is not a mass evangelist at all. The secret to the Billy Graham meetings, which he has tried for fifty years to explain to anyone who will listen, is that they focus on individual Christians talking to the people they know. Non-Christians do not attend Graham Crusades, for the most part, because of the advertisements. They go because someone has invited them.

The Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago adopted this same strategy to a church context when they first began. The Seeker Service is the big meeting, like the Graham Crusade. People do not go to the big meeting because of advertisements. Willow Creek does not advertise. Church members talk to their friends about Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the only good reason for ever going to church.

Christians need not fear the strangeness of the future. For two thousand years we have faced the strangeness of the future. We have survived the destruction of Jerusalem, the fall of the Roman Empire, the collapse of the feudal system, the religious wars of the Reformation, the industrial revolution, and two world wars. We have even survived the comfort and success of the establishment of the church as the religion of Rome, the schism of the Eastern and Western churches, the lustful carnage of the Crusades, the rage of the Inquisition, the sensuality of the Renaissance, the arrogance of the Enlightenment, and the hypocrisy of Colonialism. Our experience with postmodernity will largely depend on whether we view postmodern people as an enemy or an opportunity.

The loss of the historic place of privilege that Christianity enjoyed for fifteen hundred years is probably the most dramatic jolt of the postmodern shift. When I went to seminary twenty-five years ago, I first heard the common aphorism that Christianity is always just one generation away from extinction if we do not evangelize the next generation. That extinction has now almost occurred in Europe and draws near in the United States at a time when people are turning to Christ by the millions in regions of the world where Christ was once little known. The shift of status in the United States will help restore the apostolic quality of the church as people find no particular social, economic, or political advantage to belonging to a church. Postmodernity will help Christians focus again on the Person who brought them together in the first place. He has a great deal to offer postmodern people.

Christians lament the growing intolerance of the culture toward

Christianity. Though pluralism represents a major feature of the postmodern world, the exclusive demands of Christianity represents a threat to pluralism. It was so two thousand years ago in the Roman Empire. Rome tolerated a wide range of religions, but the Christians made exclusive claims about their religion. One difference between then and now resides in the place of Christianity within society in Rome. Christians had no privilege or status. Their founder had been executed as a criminal on a Roman cross. Their gatherings included slaves and women. Christians approached nonbelievers from a position of weakness rather than from one of power. In so doing, they conquered the Roman Empire through love.

We have a more difficult situation today. Whereas ancient Christians had nothing to fear but being thrown to the lions, burned at the stake, boiled in oil, or crucified, modern Christians have to suffer the indignity of not receiving the respect we feel we deserve. We can see our losses in historical perspective. The tendency is to think that we have a right to our place in society. Christianity has had a historic influence on the development of the West and the United States in particular. It is hard to let go of that place. We forget that we had that influence because society was made up, by and large, of people who owed some loyalty to Christ. We cannot retreat from the culture and be surprised that Christ is no longer acknowledged within that culture.

May Christians expect persecution at the hands of postmodern people? In many parts of the world evangelism is a capital offense. Governments execute people for sharing their faith in Christ. In those contexts, Jesus Christ represents a direct challenge to the entire social order. Unlike the hit or miss, nebulous vacuum of a worldview represented by postmodernity, the ancient and fully formed worldviews of the world, represented by Hinduism or Islam, and the more recent political worldviews, represented by Communism and fascism, cannot tolerate a challenge like Christ.

Postmodernity does not represent an organized worldview, culture, or mode of thought. It has no institutional form, like a religion or government. It is a moving target, constantly changing, and this book only discusses what it looks like in 2000. For this reason, Christians will not experience the same sort of persecution that Christians experience in other parts of the world. On the other hand, the vacuum quality of postmodernity will lead to forms of persecution. Whenever Christians are perceived as an obstacle to some economic, political, or social interest, people will lash out at them. The silver-smiths lashed out at the Christians in Ephesus for hurting their trade. In the past Christians could speak collectively about immoral behavior and impose legal restraints on society. Having lost its special status in society, Christians can no longer impose their moral values on the majority.

Fortunately, we have been through all of this before. John Wesley grew up

in this same vacuum. The issues were different, of course. The combination of deism, the Enlightenment, the morals of the Restoration, and the Newtonian revolution created the same kind of vacuum. Whenever it appears that all is lost, God does something. Awakenings have happened throughout history in which entire peoples return to faith in Christ. More often than not, the awakenings revolve around the young people. Awakenings seem to be a way God reaches an entire generation that the church has overlooked. It never takes many instruments for God to send an awakening. He seems to use ordinary people without much to commend them other than a willingness to take the time to help someone meet Christ.

The challenge for Christians will largely be one of attitude. If we want to save our culture, we will lose it. If we are willing to lose it for Christ's sake, we will gain it.