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Postmodernism: Ministry Implications For Church And Educational Leaders

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Suppose a 1977 college graduate were to enter a time capsule, shut the door, and press the button. The capsule disappears.

Twenty-five years later the capsule reappears, the door opens, and the graduate steps out, and returns to the campus to visit the class of 2002. The physical surroundings may be familiar, but otherwise the differences would be overwhelming. Without an understanding of the significant cultural changes that have taken place during the past quarter of a century, a time traveller would prob-

ably find the behaviour of students and the problems they encounter quite difficult to comprehend. The dramatic shifts in their attitudes, values, educational achievements, and life goals would be astounding.

We, as theological educators, have not been in a time capsule over the past twenty-five years as our culture has changed. Rather, we have become products of it, having been influenced by its patterns and values far more than we actually realize. Culture is reality in our lives; its influences cannot be denied. Instead of attempting to mitigate the impact of culture on students, we must recognize its effect in order to minister to students at the beginning of the 21st Century. We have to understand the environment from which they come. We must realize there are differences with every generation of students.

What does Scripture teach us about generational changes? In Acts 13:36, the apostle Paul preached that David 'served the purpose of God in his own generation'. An

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implication of this is that God works, not only according to his purposes, but also according to the generational context of his people. Although the truths of Scripture do not change, educational methodology and forms of student ministry may need to be modified from one generation to another.

A Description of the Contemporary Student Culture

In North America, today's young adults are known by many names: Generation X, baby busters, post-boomers, slackers, or twentysomethings. Perhaps 'Generation X' (taken from the title of Douglas Copland's 1991 novel) is the best label since it signifies an unknown variable, a generation that is still in search of its identity. Whatever we choose to call these young men and women, we cannot assume they are simply clones of their parents. What makes them unique is that they are the first generation to grow up in a post-Christian era.

The distinctive nature of this generation results not only from massive changes that have taken place within the North American society, but also from a paradigm shift in western culture—the transition from modernism (the Enlightenment's legacy) to post-modernism (a radical reaction against the Enlightenment understanding of truth).

This generation is the first one to grow up under the strong influence of this postmodern world view. Andres Tapia, Research Editor for Pacific News Service, argues for the importance of understanding these

two competing paradigms—modernism exemplified by the apologetic style of Josh McDowell's book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*; postmodernism exemplified by MTV and contemporary media.¹

Modernism: 'They key assumption of modernism is that knowledge is certain, objective, good, and obtainable', asserts Stanley Grenz, formerly professor of theology at Carey and Regent Colleges in Vancouver. In this school of thought, the modern knower can profess to stand apart from the world and be an unbiased observer. Information processing is linear; one's outlook is optimistic, progress is inevitable; and the focus is on the individual.²

University of Notre Dame historian George Marsden observes that today's evangelicalism, with its focus on scientific thinking and common sense theology, is a child of early modernity. It is from these assumptions that evangelical presentations such as McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* have derived their persuasive powers and popularity for so many years.³

Postmodernism: 'In postmodernism, the primary assumption is that truth is not rational or objective', continues Grenz. 'In other words, the human intellect is not the only arbiter of truth. There are other ways of knowing, including one's emo-

¹ Andres Tapia, 'Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation', *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, p. 20.

² Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 81.

³ Tapia, 'Reaching', p. 20.

tions and intuition.' In this relativistic environment, truth is defined by individuals and the communities with whom they identify. Therefore, as is the case with this generation, information processing is nonlinear and fragmented; the idea of progress is illusory, and the focus is on community. It is from these assumptions that MTV derives its power.⁴

Although postmodernism has been around for many years, it has become increasingly global in its influence. Core values of this particular cultural paradigm include:

1. A denial of objective truth—Postmodernism is relativistic in every way. It does not believe in any type of unifying centre or that there is any common body of truth. Instead, postmodernism says that the interpretation is what determines truth. This leads to a cultural relativity that says there is no legitimate eternal authority. One cannot appeal to a text such as the Bible for answers. Any claim to knowledge can be seen as an act of power and dismissed as being intolerant.

2. A celebration of connectedness—In reaction to the isolation of autonomous individualism in modernism, there is a strong desire to be connected in some existential way with not only other humans but with the earth and all its living creatures. There is a hunger to replace conquest with cooperation and to delight in process rather than solutions. Communities are important and diversity is accepted as part of the human mosaic.

3. A pursuit of spirituality—There is a fascination with defining what it means to be spiritual. In contrast to the traditional religious life of obedience based on revelation, this new spirituality of openness is based on a sacred awareness of life's experiences. The postmodern academic world no longer pretends to be atheistic but is groping to find significance.

4. An embracing of pessimism—Postmodernism prides itself on realism and pragmatism. It is not idealistic. It believes the future is unknowable. Because the problems of the world seem unsolvable, the emphasis is placed on making the most of the present. Postmodernism seems to realize that if you cannot have the joy in the past or hope in the future, you have to survive the present. Stanley Grenz calls it a 'gnawing pessimism' that eats away at the structures of society.

While this paradigm shift might be interpreted as a cause for alarm, Grenz cautions that we avoid the trap of longing for a return to modernity that gave birth to evangelicalism. 'We cannot turn back the clock', he says. 'But we can claim the postmodern context for Christ.'⁵

Reaching this generation is more than addressing the needs of a new generation. It means coming to terms with a major cultural shift that, for better or worse, is going to change the landscape for future generations.

It is always dangerous to make broad sweeping statements about

⁴ Grenz, *Primer*, pp. 5-15.

⁵ Grenz, *Primer*, p. 174.

groups of people, let alone a whole generation of young adults from all over the world. Many students will not fit the following generalizations, yet there does seem to be a sufficiently large number of students in very different cultures that fit these categories.

Student Characteristics

1. **Uncentred**—Perhaps the most defining characteristic of students today is that they do not have stable reference points in their lives. They are not interested in the great philosophical questions on a conceptual level. Instead, they are pragmatic. They have seen too many failures of institutions, leaders, and ideologies to put much trust in systems or programs.

Furthermore, they are uncentred morally with no defining standard of right or wrong. Weak family structures create great moral vacuums. Some students have a self-described 'high tech lifestyle but a jungle morality'. One student describes life like a computer—'it just beeps when you mess up'. Such assumptions include an avoidance of believing in personal sin but nevertheless leave deep feelings of shame. Students are more likely to feel bad for who they are than for what they have or have not done. They are missing a moral centre in their lives.

2. **Sensual**—As students have lost some of their intellectual sensitivities they have gained more sensual awareness and interest. They are tremendously visual as they live in a world of constantly changing but increasingly appealing images. MTV

is a vivid reminder that even music has to be seen and not just heard.

Students are also into their physical world. They care about the environment and their bodies. They are sexually aware and active despite the danger of AIDS. They take pills at an alarming rate to build up either their bodies or their psychological state. They want to feel good in the midst of a world that is physically falling apart.

3. **Emotive**—A third characteristic is the visibly meaningful role which emotions play in this generation. The classical ideal of truth becoming passionate has been replaced by the experience of passion becoming truth. Students are not readily persuaded by dispassionate facts but are easily moved by open displays of emotion. In their self-chosen lifestyle they are playful, and irreverent, and like to party as hard as they can.

But they are also cynical and deeply fearful about life. In some parts of the world, students have no dreams for the future. They wonder if they can get a job after they graduate and if there is any future for them in their profession. They are disillusioned and are resentful that they have to grow up in a world that is such a mess. They have an innate sense of aloneness and an inability to trust anyone. They may have experienced abuse and divorce in their families and feel abandoned by previous generations. They fill their lives with things and activities to suppress the painful memories of the past and the dashed hopes of the future. They frequently have deep hostilities toward

the world and the people around them.

4. **Communal**—Although students continually feel alone, they avoid loneliness through very important circles of friendship. They want to be part of a group and do not like to stand out as individuals. This is what has weakened previously practised models of student leadership. Many students are not as willing or do not have the time to provide broad organizational leadership needed for large student movements on campus. Instead, they do things in small groups and in teams that provide more meaningful relationships and connectedness.

Students are often more accepting of racial and ethnic groups than their forbears. They are global and international citizens. Christian students, however, are confused about gender issues, especially regarding gay rights and human rights. There is often dramatic tension between their church's teachings and what they experience in the larger society. They struggle with how to handle such cultural relativity within their Christian framework.

This communal instinct, however, is a wonderfully Christian value for both evangelism and Christian discipleship. It places meaning on relationships that provide rich opportunities for sharing and demonstrating the gospel.

5. **Spiritual**—Just as the post-modern culture in general is intrigued by the spiritual world so are students. However, this response reaches beyond traditional Christian faith to the New Age and other mys-

tical religions. Islam and the cults are gaining more adherents world wide due to their discipline and aggressive recruiting.

Furthermore, because most religious options offer little hope, students have a strong preoccupation with sadness and death. They experience darkness in their souls and express it in their music, in their clothes, and in their attitude toward life.

Ministry Responses

Theological educators and church leaders must have a thorough understanding of today's college students and the nuances of their culture. We may not always condone the values and life styles they represent, but we cannot ignore them. Instead of assuming a defensive posture or pretending that problems and differences do not exist, we must respond by building bridges of friendship and concern that create a climate for Christian maturity. We need to be committed to the personal and professional development of students as they are growing to maturity in Christ. Listed below are some of the specific means by which we can contribute to this growth process:

1. **We must serve a changing Student population.** Those of us specifically involved in theological education need to take a look at the students who attend our institutions. Their needs and the support systems they require may be different from those of students in the past. More and more students may need educational programs and services to help them overcome linguistic, socioeco-

nomic, and cultural barriers to academic success. We must recognize that our student population goes beyond those in the 18 to 22 age category. It also includes older students and those from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. We must identify the types of student services and academic programs that need to be in place to serve a changing student population.

2. **We must maintain an educational community with reasonable standards.** Institutions of higher learning need standards in both academic and non-academic areas. Such standards clarify the expectations of the institution and make rules understandable. More importantly, they help to define the character of a learning community.

Standards regarding simple courtesy and the rights of others are good examples. Private space should be respected and honoured by peers. Loud noise should be prohibited. Sexism, racism, and bigotry are offences to the dignity of human beings. They violate everything a Christian institution should represent. Proper conduct also means caring for one's health and being concerned about the well-being of others.

In his book *Learning to be Human*, Lloyd Averill states a permanent truth about human nature:

A community is not just a collection of individuals. Rather it is, more fundamentally, a group of people acquiring their significance by conformity with standards and rules from which they derive their dignity. Within such a community, there is a recurrent need in men to reaffirm the rightness of the moral rules by

which they live.⁶

3. **We must develop within students a biblical world and life view.** The outcomes of a college or seminary education are traditionally measured by the student's performance in the classroom as they become proficient in the use of knowledge, acquire a basic education, and become competent in specific fields. Furthermore, the impact of the education is measured by the performance of the graduates in places of work or service. However, in the end, students must be grounded in the truths of God's Word as they are learning, growing, forming values, and impacting their world.

We must encourage students to develop the capacity to make sound judgements in matters of life and conduct. We must teach them to think, act, and even react biblically. The goal is not to indoctrinate students, but to set them free in a world of ideas and provide a climate in which ethical and moral choices can be examined and convictions formed.

This imperative does not replace the need for rigorous study in the various disciplines, but neither must specialization become an excuse to forget judgement or to weaken the search for conviction and solid biblical values.

4. **We must teach students to value service.** Service introduces students to new people and new ideas. It establishes connections between academic life and the larger

⁶ Lloyd J. Averill, *Learning to be Human* (Port Washington, New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1983), p. 131.

society. Furthermore, it should be an outgrowth of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. It is endemic to the Christian life. The servanthood of Jesus Christ is the model for 'servant-leaders' who will not only become sensitive to the needs of their community and their world, but also respond in both an altruistic and an evangelistic manner.

In the end, the goal of theological education is not only to prepare students for careers, but also to enable them to live lives of purpose—not only to give knowledge to students, but to channel knowledge into service. The Christian college or theological seminary provides an ideal opportunity for this type of Christian service.

5. **We must provide a support system for the emotional and physical needs of today's students.** Our current group of students brings many mental and physical health concerns with them to the campus. Some of them come from deplorable home situations. Others are victims of child molestation or incest. Some have had firsthand knowledge of eating disorders, suicide, or a sexually transmitted disease, while others have had experience with alcohol or other habit-forming drugs. With all the complications in the lives of today's students, we have no choice but to mobilize health and counselling staff, student life professionals, faculty, and clergy in providing a strong support system. We have a responsibility for the development of complete students—the physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual

aspects of their lives.

6. **We must recognize the place that Art and Media play in ministry.** The centrality of music and TV in the lives of today's students cannot be overestimated. VCR's, MTV, CD players, cable, and personal computers are all part of their lives. Because these forms of art and media are so much a part of the culture of today's young adults, they must be used effectively to reach them. We must ask ourselves, how can we use these cultural norms to reach this generation? For example, young adults see art as a primary vehicle for worship. This generation likes to worship through music and drama. It is through these times of creative worship that students give spiritual meaning to their lives.

7. **We must create a strong sense of Christian community.** A caring climate needs to be developed where various students and groups are welcome. To accomplish this, we must appreciate the differences that make each group unique. Then we must recognize the community or common bond we share in Jesus Christ. Diversity and unity are compatible. In fact, they are both equally necessary. Our challenge is not the development of rugged individualism. That happens with little effort. Our major challenge is to create a community in which students see their responsibility to the Lord and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

8. **We must serve as healthy role models.** In a day and age when biblical values appear to be

given little attention, we need to communicate them loudly and clearly. Students long for people they can trust, who are not using or abusing them. They are not interested in religious pronouncements or sterile arguments. They want to see people whose walk matches their talk. When we say that particular individuals are persons of integrity, we no doubt mean that they radiate that quality through their behaviour and total being. Whatever that particular value or character quality may be, it must be modelled. Beyond what we write or what we say, we must ask God to help us to be godly role models after whom today's students can pattern their lives.

9. **We must demonstrate obedient love.** Students are desperately in need of love—a love that is far deeper and broader than superficial romantic expressions. Jesus emphasized the primacy of the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:36-40). As disciples, we are to love God and our neighbour. We are to do this with all of our being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. It is a truly comprehensive love that incorporates all that we are. If we are to reach today's generation of students with the life-

changing message of Christ, we must do so from a foundation of love for them and their God.

10. **We must allow Christ to be preeminent in every area of our ministry.** Like all other people to whom we minister, students need to know Christ as their Saviour and their Lord. He is the only true prophet, priest, and king. As Paul wrote to the believers in Colosse, Christ is to be 'preeminent in all things' (Col. 1:18).

It is easy to live our Christian lives with a preeminence on doctrine or spiritual experiences or social concerns. It is all too easy to lose our first love for Christ and become married to what is culturally, methodologically, or organizationally most comfortable. Such groups do not reflect deep affection for the Lord and fail to attract others to enjoy a deeper relationship with Christ.

The challenge and opportunity for us is to model Christ by talking about him, studying his life, and living our lives in adoration and obedience to him. Our worship, our lifestyle, and our allegiance must be a transparent commitment to the one 'who loved us and gave himself for us.' It is that Jesus who makes himself available to students today as Saviour and Lord.