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The Unchanging Word of God and Today's Fast-Changing Generations

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Abstract

This article advocates that the Bible, as the unchanging word of God, represents a revelation that is relevant simultaneously not only for the modern world but also for the fast-changing generation X, Y, Z of the postmodern era. It will analyse the way in which the message of the Bible is relevant over time. It will be discussed how some argue that the presentation of the Gospel must consider the cultural setting in which the message is proclaimed, others will suggest that relevance is almost akin to compromise.

Key Words: modernism; postmodern era; revelation; relevance; the word of God.

Introduction

There are significant discrepancies between modern and post-modern times. In modernism the mind was understood as a reflection of nature, given the fact that the reality was perceived as it was. In this naturalistic milieu, there was a strong emphasis on technological accomplishment and progress, while the individual was regarded as the measure of all things through his rational ability to manage the natural order. Although there is no definite moment of transition from one trend to another, the shift from modern to post-modern paradigm started in the middle of the 20th century and was developed toward the latter part of this century. Post modernism regarded the rationality and technological achievement of modernism as unsatisfactory and even dangerous. Modernism was dismissed as oppressive, arrogant, violent and dangerous to the natural realm because of its technological and scientific expansion.

The progress of modernism became a dangerous trip towards disaster; hence in postmodernism the autonomous individual was replaced with social entities, the

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objective reality was replaced with subjective relativism and pluralism. Although both modernism and post modernism are based on a naturalistic framework, the difference between the two systems is that while modernism approaches reality as a mirror, postmodernism approaches reality as a window that shows us the reality that can be perceived through the means of social epistemology.

Answering to both modernism and postmodernism, Christianity comes with a theistic approach to reality in which the natural reality is totally dependent on and governed by God as a sovereign ultimate authority. The Bible, which encapsulates God's revelation, comes with a supernatural worldview and advocates the existence of an objective and moral truth about God that can be known through faith. This epistemological endeavour contrasts the modern naturalistic epistemology and postmodern epistemological relativism.

When it comes to the postmodern society, we discover that postmodernity is fragmented and encompasses different generations which although having the same fundamental values, are distinct in many ways. The sociologist Karl Mannheim defined the concept of *generation* as a fundamental tool for the study of social sciences.[2] In time, the study of generation, tended to be more and more fragmented. This is why today's population can be categorized in five distinct generations: the Silent Generation; the Baby Boomers; and the Generations X, Y, and Z.

The purpose of this article is to advocate that the Bible, as the unchanging word of God, represents a revelation that is relevant simultaneously not only for the modern world but also for the fast-changing generation X, Y, Z of the postmodern era. Because of the difference between various cultures and ages, it is important to analyse the way in which the message of the Bible is relevant over time. As the message of the Gospel was carried from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, the message was proclaimed undistorted, however the presentation of the message varied from one setting to another. This aspect triggers a detailed discussion about the issue of relevance. While some can argue that the presentation of the Gospel must consider the cultural setting in which the message is proclaimed, others can argue that relevance is almost akin to compromise and should not be taken into consideration in the process of proclamation. Should the proclamation of the Word of God differ from one context to another? How should we differentiate between relevance as a means of contextualizing the Gospel message in spite of the cultural values and

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[2] Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge: Collected Works*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti, vol. 5 (New York: Routledge, 1952), 276–322.

relevance as compromising the Gospel message to the detriment of cultural values?

Five Generations, Five Worlds

Today's society is generally seen as a pluralistic society that is formed by five distinct generations: the Silent Generation; the Baby Boomers; and the Generations X, Y, and Z.

The Silent Generation is the generation of people born before the end of the Second World War. Due to the socio-political milieu of the years of depression between the two world wars, the generation that was born in this context has a traditional approach to life with a high regard for authority and the older generation. An article in Time Magazine described this generation as Unimaginative, Withdrawn, Unadventurous, and Cautious.[3]

This generation was followed by the Baby Boomers, the generation that was born in the following two decades after the war. The name of this generation is given by the significant birth rate increase following the social realities after the Second World War. This generation had a more liberal approach to life in general in the new economic environment that the world faced.

The next Generation is Generation X, those that were born in the 60s and 70s. The term Generation X was first used by Robert Capa, a renown photographer and a photojournalist as a title of one of his photo-essays that he used in order to describe a group of young people, seemingly without identity, who face an uncertain, ill-defined and hostile future.[4] One example of research on Generation X is the volume *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture.*[5] This collection of essays analyses this phenomenon with all its corresponding features. This generation had a different approach to life since they were the generation that had to become more independent since they experienced less adult supervision compared to that of their parents. The development of the musical culture reflects greater openness toward the social dimension of life.

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[3] 'The Younger Generation', *Time*, 5 November 1951, 46–47, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php? title=Silent_Generation&oldid=933687873; 'Silent Generation', in *Wikipedia*, 2 January 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Silent_Generation&oldid=933687873.

[4] John M. Ulrich, 'Introduction. Generation X. A (Sub)Cultural Genealogy', in *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture*, ed. John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2003), 3.

[5] John M. Ulrich and Andrea L. Harris, eds., *GenXegesis: Essays on Alternative Youth (Sub)Culture* (Madison: Popular Press, 2003).

This generation was followed by the Millennials, those that were born in the 80s and 90s. The Millennials were born into an era with unprecedented digital technological advance. This generation is generally seen as egocentric and group oriented.

The last two decades are generally described as the Generation Z or the Centennial's, those that were born in the 21st century. This generation is totally immersed in the use of digital devices and online communication. Because technology makes all things available at once, this generation tends to lack patience and be unwilling to wait. They were raised with the idea that they are special and they can have whatever they want. However, faced with the real world, they discovered that they are not as special as they thought, and because of this their self-image is actually destroyed. From a psychological point of view, the self-image of this generation is incomparably lower than that of the previous generation. In order to solve this issue, this generation tends to use the image that is offered within technology. However, their relationships are more superficial and this is another factor that enhances their depression. So, it appears that this generation is facing the new challenges of a digital world like no other generation before.

People of the Book in a world of images

It is important to note that the generations X, Y, and Z share the notion of community as a fundamental value in which autonomy is subjected to social entities and context and reality is defined by the community. All these characteristics have a spiritual dimension. George Barna's research, particularly on the generation that is present in the local church, highlights that as the generations change their values tend to change as well. Writing on the "reengineering" of the local church for the next millennium George Barna highlighted that there will be some significant transitions that will take place in the emerging Church today. He noted that as we introduce new approaches to ministry, many of the fundamental elements of the Church will undoubtedly be redefined.[6] While some changes that are promoted by the emerging Church today will help the Church, the quality of the ministry will not necessarily improve.

While Western civilization flourished with the help of printed media, it made the printed media more and more elaborate. If at the beginning the type-set was the basic tool in which each letter had its place, with the rise of modern media, the shift from words to drawings, diagrams, pictures and images inevitably grew.

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[6] George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 177.

The rise of technology has produced a major shift from the Gutenberg epoch to the Zuckerberg world. This generation started to focus more on image than on the written word. This change had fully impacted the way in which society today operates with cognitive realities. The shift from a reading process with all its subsequent cognitive development to a world of image that affects not so much the reasoning, but the feeling of a person had taken its full toll with the emerging new generations.

This shift from words to images has impacted the way people relate to the Word of God. The lack of emphasis on the written word is inevitably affecting the way people relate to Scripture. Kenton Sparks analysed the way in which the premodern, modern, and postmodern period function. He noted that the differences between these three periods hinge, in many respects, on the concept of *tradition* - the Latin term "traditio" means that which is transmitted or "handed on." "Individuals tend to receive their view of the world passively, as they grow up in and are acculturated to their native family and society."[7] This is especially true in the postmodern period where biblical interpretation is shaped by the community.

However, the message of the Bible has a divine nature since it is the God-breathed word of God. The Bible is not only inspiring but is also inspired (2 Timothy 3:16). Postmodern times proved themselves to be driven by epistemological scepticism and relativism. Ben Witherington correctly argued that "postmodernity offers up a relativism that denies absolute truth, a pluralism that valorizes difference whether or not it is or produces good or ill, and a universalism which suggests all is lost and all of us are permanently lost."[8]

Looking back throughout history, in both Biblical times and Church history, the divine revelation of the Word of God is always a defining and reforming reality. There are several moments in Biblical times in which spiritual reformation meant a total returning from a world of images and idolatry to the Word of God. Also, Church History has many instances in which spiritual reformation took place as people discovered the value of the Word of God and its intrinsic power to change.

As the generations change from one historical context to another, it is important to analyze the nature of the Word of God in relation to various generations that seems at times in opposition. This article advocates that the Bible, as the inspired

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[7] Kenton L. Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 26.
[8] Ben Witherington III, *The Living Word of God: Rethinking the Theology of the Bible* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 173.

Word of God has a unique spiritual dimension in the fact that the same revelation can be approached by various people from various generations and have the same outcome of salvation for the glory of God. The universal nature of the Word of God represents a distinct feature that makes the Scripture relevant for each generation that seems in many regards as belonging to different worlds. Even if the generations are nowadays changing in nature at an alarming pace, the unchanging word of God represents a reality that is simultaneously absolute and relevant.

The need for Revelation

The Bible represents the written manifestation of divine revelation. While in modernism the truth is defined only by empiric scientific methodologies, post-modernism claims there is no such thing as absolute truth, but only stories and narrative experiences. The truth is a subjective entity that is interpreted and defined by the community. From a Christian perspective, the world is not only in need of revelation but also is meaningless without it.

Looking at the New Testament we discover that the Gospel narrative is presented as a historical narrative that is simultaneously true and personal. The community of faith discovers the narrative of Jesus' story as being not only true but also transcendent. Thus, the narrative is in fact a metanarrative of faith in which the truth defines the community not vice-versa. The main truth of the Gospel is the resurrection story, a story that is presented at both individual level and community level.

One Word, Many Worlds

An Unchanging Word addressed to Distinct Individuals

One example of the way in which the message of the Gospel is unchanged, while it is addressed to significant distinct individuals is the resurrection encounters as presented in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John 20-21, the Evangelist presents three distinct interactions between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Jesus and Thomas and Jesus and Peter. The interaction is totally distinct and shows that the same message is relevant for every individual regardless of their identity or background.

In the first personal encounter, Jesus discovers Himself to Mary Magdalene, a woman who is spiritually and emotionally bankrupt. The dialogue between the two protagonists is in a familiar, soft tone. The use of the Aramaic words attests this warm and familiar tone. While the Evangelist uses the name Μαρία, Jesus

calls her using the Aramaic form Μαριάμ. The use of this form of address that can be translated as Miriam is followed by her address also using the Aramaic Ραββουνι.

The following personal encounter that is presented with extensive details is between Jesus and Thomas. While Thomas, called the Twin, was not with the disciples when Jesus came, his response to the testimony of disciples about the resurrection of Jesus is filled with scepticism and unbelief. As Jesus appears to Thomas eight days later, the discussion between Jesus and Thomas is marked with rational insights. Jesus does not ask Thomas simply to believe without arguments, but on the contrary, He invites him to believe based on empiric evidence by touching His body as a rational proof for believing.

On the appearance by the Sea of Tiberias, the Evangelist focuses on Jesus and Peter. After the miraculous catch of fish, the discussion with Peter gravitates on the special mandate that Jesus is giving to Peter, but also on the discussion about the fate of the disciple whom Jesus loved. Peter's question about what is going to happen with this disciple finds a striking response with a rather harsh tone: 'If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you?' (v.22). If this passage is interpreted apart from Peter's strong personality that is presented in the Gospel, the reader can be puzzled about the direct tone that Jesus is using. However, given the fact that Peter is a person with a strong will and a dynamic personality, the response that he receives to his question should not be perceived in a disturbing manner.

Therefore, if all these personal encounters are placed together, we can see that the resurrected Jesus interacts with various individuals in very different ways. Jesus addressed Mary in a warm, familiar tone, Thomas in a rational way, and Peter in a direct manner. The message of the resurrection is the same, while the methodology is different.

An Unchanging Word to distinct communities

The universal nature of the Word of God is also seen in the fact that the same Word brings salvation when it is presented not only to different individuals but also to different cultures. In the Acts of the Apostle the message of the Gospel is presented to many cultures. From the beginning of the book the mandate that Jesus gives to the disciples has a universal dimension in which the Gospel must be proclaimed from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The end of the book finds Paul in Rome, a place that can be seen not only as the

centre of the first century world, but also the strategic place from where the Gospel will eventually spread to the ends of the earth.

To highlight the universal nature of the message of the Gospel it is important to note the fact that this message remains unchanged even if this message is proclaimed by the Apostle Peter to the Jews in Jerusalem or by the Apostle Paul to the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens.

The religious, social and political context is so distinct that one can describe the two contexts as being two different worlds. The Acts of the Apostle becomes a strong testimony about the universal nature of the Word of God that remains unchanged even if the context changes completely.

The double call in preaching: faithful to the Word, faithful to the audience

The call to preach the Word of God to a Fast-Changing society comes with a huge challenge since the preacher is situated between the absolutes of the divine revelation and the ever-changing expectations of the audience. There is a distinction between distorting the message to fit the audience or making it meaningless to the audience. If a Nobel laureate in Physics is asked to present various physical principles, he will present his topic in one way at undergraduate level and to the academic elites in Physics in a totally different manner. It is wrong to say that the Nobel laureate is distorting the principles of Physics given the fact that he made his presentation to the undergraduate students relevant. Similarly, in order to communicate the Word of God to various generations, the preacher has to stay faithful to the word but also he has to be sensitive and responsible to his audience in a manner that will not be misunderstood by them.

Alec Motyer, in his book "Preaching?" noted the fact that the preacher has not one, but two responsibilities. The first responsibility of the preacher is to the truth, while the second responsibility is to the audience. Motyer correctly noted that the preacher should be concerned by the manner in which the audience will hear best the truth. This implies the fact that the presentation of the Gospel must be shaped in such a way that the message becomes palatable and the audience is receptive to it.

This aspect triggers a discussion about relevance and compromise. Is the attempt to be relevant a deviation from the teaching of the Bible? Is there a tension in preaching between adopting God's revelation and adapting it to fit the audience? The answer to this question is multifaceted and claims a clear definition of the term relevance.

Relevance and Compromise

Erick Metaxas, in his book about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, noted that for Bonhoeffer the preaching was considered to be nothing less than the very word of God. For him, the act of preaching was not merely an intellectual exercise but a holy privilege to be the vessel through whom God would speak. Because of this he once said: "Do not try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic. Do not defend God's word, but testify to it. Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of its capacity."[9] The intrinsic power of the Word of God to change the human heart is an argument against any attempt to try to fit the word of God to the audience and not vice versa (*e.g.* Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.) Any attempt to make the Gospel relevant means an attempt to dilute its essence.

On the other hand, one can argue that the Apostle Paul becomes relevant to the community to whom he was preaching the Word of God. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions that to the Jews he became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; while to those under the law he became as one under the law that be might win those under the law (1 Corinthians 9:20). However, it is important to note what Paul is saying and what he is not saying in his address to the Corinthian Church. First, Paul does not cross the moral line in order to present the message of the Gospel. Paul's address to the Church in Corinth is very strict when it comes to personal liberty and especially to the moral dimension of Christian living. Second, Paul does not succumb to the present social realities in order to get eventually to the Gospel message. Paul was always presenting the Gospel upfront and, starting from the Gospel, he became all things to all people, that he might save some (1 Corinthians 9:22). For Paul, the message of the Gospel is not the target of his ministry, but the starting point. Third, Paul is advocating in his letter to the Corinthians a lifestyle that rejects compromise, but also embraces personal denial.

For Paul, to be relevant is a synonym to contextualize not to compromise. This aspect is seen in the fact that while preaching the Gospel it is important to identify some vital features of the audience and use these characteristics as a tool to present better the message of the Word of God. Tim Keller argued that the claim of religious relativism is not a solution, because it is an exclusive claim to

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[9] Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 272.

superiority masking itself as something else. For him, Jesus' dying on the cross best fulfils the yearning of our pluralistic culture for peace and respect among people of different faiths. "This is contextualizing—showing the plausibility of the gospel in terms my culture can understand."[10] As the generations change, the sociologists can identify a shift on the emphasis on mind in opposition to the emotions. A faithful approach to the preaching of the Word of God will not put knowledge and feelings in antithetic positions but will navigate through the variables of a specific cultural group or period with the absolute message of the Gospel.

Conclusion

One fundamental doctrine about God is the immutability of his nature. God is the same yesterday, today and forever (*e.g.,* Numbers 23:19; Malachi 3.6; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17). The Word of God presents at length a God that does not change even if the society and culture is changing often. The universal nature of the Word of God means that this Word presents a message of salvation, sanctification and glorification that is perpetually relevant to any group or generation.

The concept of truth in Christian theism is an absolute reality. Voddie Baucham correctly noted that if something is "true," that is, if it corresponds to God's perspective, then it is true for all people in all places at all times.[11]

The Word of God is rooted in the nature of God; therefore, the message of the Bible is an unchanging reality that supersedes today's fast-changing generations. At the same time, the Word of God is simultaneously absolute and relevant.

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[10] Tim Keller, 'The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World', in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, ed. Piper, John and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 118.
[11] Voddie Baucham Jr., 'Truth and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World', in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, ed. Piper, John and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 53.

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