

Post-Modern Possibilities

by Leonard Hjalmarson

A Primer on Kingdom Opportunities in a Post-Modern Culture

“We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery.” Annie Dillard

I was sitting with an evangelical pastor listening to his story. His associate, ten years younger than he, felt that their church needed to experiment with new styles and new music. He wanted to see greater participation, more use of media, and a less structured order of service. The older man feared that in changing the forms the functions might be lost; he also feared that connecting with postmodern culture meant abandoning truth. The younger man feared that the forms limited function; he also feared that not connecting with postmodern culture would mean a dying church, disconnected from the real world. The two men parted company, both perceiving a cultural gap.

“Postmodernism is a huge threat. Advocating the impossibility of knowing truth, it throws off all limits and casts us adrift in a sea of doubt.”

“Postmodernism is a tremendous opportunity. It offers the potential for the rediscovery of spiritual reality and the integration of faith in everyday life.”

Two positions. Two opinions. Is one position true, or both?

A Critique of the Modern World

On one tenet most interpreters agree: postmodern culture represents a profound critique of modernism. Since the western church is a modern institution, the postmodern critique of culture also represents a powerful critique of the church. That critique, for a variety of reasons, is threatening to many of the old generation of leaders.

Postmodernism is a threat to some because they fear what they fail to understand. Imagine a Christian from the first century walking into a contemporary church service. Separated by 2000 years of history and culture, our modern church would be unintelligible to Peter or Paul. Similarly, moderns are a world-view distant from postmoderns.

Postmodernism is a threat to others because they have no first hand experience of it. They rely on modern interpreters who are reacting in fear. As a result, many modern leaders only hear a caricature of postmodern positions. They see only the negative, and not the possibilities.

Some concerns are legitimate. In postmodern culture there is no possibility of objective truth, and no absolutes. It is critical to distinguish between postmodernity as an intellectual movement deconstructing modernity's assumptions and postmodern culture with its particular set of values, like tolerance and moral relativity.

In *Retrofuture*ⁱ Gerard Kelly indicts the established church for working overtime attempting to create a rational propositional faith in order to become acceptable to modern culture. Post-modern Christians do not reject the historic faith or the reality of revelation. Instead, they reject modern assumptions and embrace paradox and the postmodern critique of culture. Often this is done with the hope of stripping away modern distortions and recovering the ancient faith once delivered. They understand that in order to move forward, we must reach back.

"Modern society was a culture that consumed its own past. In contrast, post-modern pilgrims honor the bones of the dead and make those bones live." Leonard Sweet, Postmodern Pilgrims

When church leaders reject the postmodern movement, they risk becoming isolated from the culture they live in. This in turn guarantees that the church communities they build will gradually stagnate and die, becoming museum communities rather than missional communities. Instead, modern leaders must listen to the tolling of the bell that indicates the death of the modern world, and not ask for whom the bell tolls.

What are some of the tenets of postmodernism that offer a unique opportunity for the Gospel? There are many, and we'll consider them in a series of three articles under these headings: the Seed, the Soil and the Gardeners.

The Seed

the Spiritual Nature of Life
community and Connection
experience over Knowledge
journey and Process over Goal

The Soil

participation over professionalism and "excellence"
truth in paradox, images and story
spontaneous order, fluid boundaries

The Gardeners Part I

rejection of authority in position
leadership by wisdom and example
webs of connection

The Gardeners Part II

Models and metaphors
Leadership as meaning making
Preaching to exiles

The Spiritual Nature of Life

The gospel pleads a message of grace, and still Christians live as if they are 'G' people offended by an 'R' world. John Fischer, Source Unknown

The New Age has been almost as big of a bogey-man as Gen X for the past 20 years. We've invested a lot of time "proving" that New Age mysticism is leading thousands into a Christ-less eternity. The reality is that they were going to a Christ-less eternity anyway, with or without the New Age.

Shows like "X-Files", "Millennium", and "Highlander" (to name a few) have shown a new acceptance of spiritual reality. Witness the sense of the sacred in Highlander, where ancient cathedrals are considered "Holy Ground" where bloodshed cannot occur.

The good news of the New Age and rise of mysticism is that people are open to the reality of the spiritual realm, including Jesus called the Christ. Most people aren't against God or Jesus, they have a problem with Christians, or more precisely, their stereotype of what Christians are like

(images in popular media and televangelism).

Far too many people outside the walls of the church only experience Christianity via popular media, or the example of a well meaning Christian whose life failed to match the faith they professed. Fewer still have seen an example of real Christian community, where believers care for one another as if they are family.

The good news of postmodernism is that the paradigm of attending church on Sunday without giving "religion" another thought the rest of the week is a foreign concept. Postmodern society assumes a more holistic, integrated approach to spirituality and everyday life.

Desire for Community and Connection

Community is the place where the healing of our own lives will become the foundation for the healing of the nations.ⁱⁱ

This "fatherless" generation, however much expressing itself in violence at times, is more open to relationship than ever before. In what seems like a paradox, the emerging generations want to be individualistic, but to do so in a community. Consider the popularity of "Friends" and "Party of Five", where young adults are trying to make life work, not as rugged individuals, but as a community. Even older shows like "Cheers" touched a nerve with the question "wouldn't you like to go where everybody knows your name?"

This is a great opportunity for those who are willing to invest in relationships with cross-generational intent to actually become spiritual "fathers and mothers" and help create a "family of faith."

After twelve years as a typical church trying to become relevant to the community outside the walls, Robert Girard's community gave their building back to the denomination and started meeting in homes. "*We no longer have the structures of meetings, programs and vision to hold us together as a church. The only structure holding us together is relationships; if we fail at love, there will be nothing left.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

In the late 70's Norman Kraus argued out that the defining experience of Pentecost was not tongues of fire and new languages, but the creation of a new community: the laos of God. While the new community was not completely disconnected from the old -- God had had a people before Pentecost -- the new community was filled with the Spirit. The Spirit empowered them both inward, in community and outward, into mission. The empowerment to be a community was immediately demonstrated in the desire to share the world's goods with those who lacked "that there might be equality" (1 Cor.8).

It is evident that this new people share much more than a Sunday gathering. In fact, they share a life that is characterized by a quality of relationships that was unknown in the ancient world. Jim Petersen comments,

"Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together" is our refrain. We are good at congregating. Where we have trouble is with some of the other equally essential functions of the church. God's people are not, in essence, a congregation. They are community. "Congregation" is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the gathering of the people of Israel. "Community" implies life together, a life of caring for one another that touches the full spectrum of our affairs.^{iv}

A friend of mine once commented on his life experience in church. He described his experience as "rotating serial alliances" rather than friendships. The real measure of the success of a church

may well be the quality of relationships that continue when the instruments are packed away and the lights are turned out.

The images of the church in the NT are communal.. we are a living Temple, a body, and a people. In the quantum world of Neils Bohr and David Bohm "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.." and the community is more real than the individual. Perhaps then the body is more real than the Christian. Maybe the isolated Christian doesn't really exist.

Desire for Experience over Knowledge

We are only now emerging from a long ice age during which an undue emphasis was laid upon objective truth at the expense of subjective experience. A. W. Tozer

We were in trouble as soon as the Gospel entered the Greek world. We lost the Hebraic perspective on the integration of being and act, and the wholeness of truth in life.

The separation of sacred and secular led to the objectification of truth and thus the scientific revolution, and finally the technological revolution. While the benefits are countless, the long term impact on humanity and our world has been staggering.

Moderns became obsessed with knowledge and information. Some of the results have been confessionalism, fundamentalism and many other 'isms" that have distorted the Gospel. When truth became objective and propositional, we lost the connection with covenant and transformation. It became possible to identify with the facts of Christianity while not allowing those facts to transform our lives or connect us to the Christian community.

*Those who know don't have the words to tell;
Those with the words don't know too well.. Bruce Cockburn^v*

According to a recent poll, 66 percent of Americans believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. Furthermore, 53 percent who identify themselves as "evangelical Christians" believe there are no absolutes.

Where moderns believed in objectivity, postmoderns do not. Postmoderns maintain that objectivity is a myth, that the observer always becomes part of the equation. Furthermore, postmoderns are not content with confessions and creeds. They want to experience the truth to which the creeds are confessions are pointing. They are hungry for reality.

The corrective is useful. Truth was always meant to embrace both "objective" and "subjective" by becoming incarnate in life. Truth was meant to be personal. Thus when Jesus said "I AM the way, the truth, and the life," He was giving us the heart of the Gospel.

Is the couplet from Bruce Cockburn above so different from that found in St. John of the Cross?

*This knowing that unknowns
Has mastery so great,
Should any sage oppose
He'd blunder in debate,
Being no such advocate
as know, not knowing, there
burst the mind's barrier.*

St. John of the Cross, "Deep Rapture"

We need to embrace the tension between the objective and subjective dimensions of faith. Paul's desire was that we become ministers of the new covenant, "Not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for

the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor.3:6). Evangelicals tend to be well anchored in the word, but not always so open to the Spirit. Yet the Father draws us to an intimate union.

Journey and Process over Goal

We have a church that does not understand process and growth, largely because the people who understand these realms are not in any place of authority or real influence. Reason has replaced revelation. Graham Cooke^{vi}

One of the stranger realities of discipleship is hitting middle age and realizing how little you know. But I’ve found some good company. Abraham had little idea what lay in store for him (Heb 11). I wonder what he told his friends when they asked why he was relocating his family?

“So, where are you going Abram?”

”I don’t know.”

“Resigned from that cushy government job too, I hear. Hey.. you want the phone number of my therapist?”

In 1993 my wife and I both resigned from jobs in public service to move to the wilds of the Canadian rockies. In 1998 we moved again, this time to Kelowna, BC, a civilized center of 100,000 people.

Then in 2000 we transitioned from Sunday services to Sunday parties. Translation: we quit “attending church” and started doing church in our home. That led to a process of personal discovery, a new journey with the Lord, and a journey in serving the poor.

In retrospect the roads less traveled look interesting, but initially tend to be confusing, uncomfortable, and chaotic. Change is like that.

While the general direction of kingdom expression is known (“to present every man mature in Christ” or “the summing up of all things in the Head”), perhaps we have been too sure about some of the other goals. Postmoderns are very comfortable with process. They aren’t as concerned about measurable results and outcomes. It’s tough to argue that our concern with clear goals has really produced a better world or a world more open to the Gospel.

In emphasizing the journey, postmoderns remind us that it isn’t about what we do, but who we are and who we are becoming. Richard Rohr comments that,

“We give people who we are much more than what we do. The Latin saying had a clever ring to it: “Nemo dat quod non hat.” No one can give away what they do not have. And transformed people tend to transform other people—just by being who they are.” (Radical Grace newsletter, July, 2001)

Furthermore, postmoderns downplay results, and remind us that character is critical. It’s a good reminder, because our world has become so obsessed with production that stress is killing us at an alarming rate. The call to find God in the process is a good corrective to our performance orientation.

All this throws postmoderns back to an “I don’t know, but I’m learning” position, one that isn’t radically different from Abraham’s position when he went out, “not knowing where he was going.” That place of blind faith can be a radical dependence on God.

Part II The Soil

Emphasis on Participation over Spectator Mentality

Order is always birthed out of chaos. When chaos surrounds us, the Holy Spirit broods over us...and God is creating a new masterpiece.^{vii} Graham Cooke

Postmodern gatherings will look chaotic to most modern leaders. In fact, in a postmodern gathering we may wonder who the leaders are.

Where traditional gatherings are leader centered, postmodern gatherings tend to be community centered. Furthermore, where traditional gatherings tend to be ordered and linear, postmodern gatherings tend to be non-linear, painting a picture rather than building clearly toward an end. They rely more on spontaneous connections and serendipity than on control and planned outcomes.

Strangely, this sounds a lot like a Spirit led gathering, or like the description of the meeting outlined by Paul in 1 Cor. 14. (For an argument that this outline is normative, see Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*.^{viii})

A few years ago an intriguing proposal made the mailing list circuit. It carefully detailed the resume of a certain fisherman, offering him as a pastoral leader for any growing church. The resume included his lack of education, and his tendency to impulsive action. Somehow the Apostle Peter didn't sound like a good candidate for apostolic or pastoral ministry!

Not long afterward, a friend forwarded me this excerpt from "Second Thoughts on Missions," by WC Lees.

Let me picture for you a jungle friend of mine. He is five feet, two inches in height and pug nosed. Two enormous wild bear tusks stand out like hat pegs from his punctured ear lobes. His heavy earrings are of brass. Since childhood, they have stretched the lower part of his lobes, until now they are two inches longer than mine. His only covering, apart from a loin cloth, are festoons of beads around his neck, and black grass bands around his legs just below the knees. He is just literate, which is a notable achievement, for literacy comes with the gospel.

It is easy to think of him as a quaint hangover from the past, - a "wild man" from Borneo. Yet he is a pastor, and one well able to use the Scriptures - his only book. He is emphatically a better pastor than I am. he has not been to a bible college, nor attended school. There were none to which he could go. He is, however, a man who is relentlessly obedient to every scrap of light which the Scriptures bring him. To such God keeps his promise and gives further understanding... (John 7:17)

We desperately need the cross cultural perspective to remind us that our professional approach to ministry has more to do with our own cultural values than with a biblical standard. Our high value set on knowledge, a particular gift mix, predictability, order, and in particular, excellence all push us toward the professionalization of ministry. The result is decreased participation, decreased ownership and personal responsibility, boredom, and a spectator mentality.

If the "medium is the message," the postmodern gathering may do more to empower a sense of peoplehood than the information and leader centered gatherings we have commonly known.

This world of a simpler way has a natural and spontaneous tendency toward organization. It seeks order. Whatever chaos is present at the start, when elements combine, systems of organization appear. Life is attracted to order -- order gained through wandering explorations into new relationships and new possibilities. ix

The interactive nature of postmodern gatherings can help us recover the understanding that everyone is a player, and that too much leadership is as bad as no leadership. We have tended to emphasize control and rational structure, which may appear efficient while actually causing us to limit participation and thus neglect body life as outlined in Eph.4 where “every part does its work.”

Truth in Paradox, Images and Story

The THIRD email of Paul to the Corinthians

Paul, an apostle of Christ and a slave of the Lord, to the brothers in Corinth who are using e-mail accounts other than AOL. I will send a separate message to those using AOL accounts, knowing how primitive their e-mail service is at the present time.

This is the third e-mail I am sending to you. Did you receive my other two? I have had no reply from you yet, and a "fatal delivery" error message for the second e-mail, in which I wrote about love, faith and hope. I will send it again, just in case.

I sent my second message to the congregations throughout the whole of Asia Minor, but my service provider considered this to be spamming and closed down one of my accounts. To those who are using Web based e-mail accounts, I will send Timothy to you with my message on foot. It will get there quicker.

Philemon and Titus send you their love. I found their e-mails amidst a flood of junk mail and get-rich-quick messages, in which there is no real profit.

Even though I recently upgraded my aging Pentium 90, I'm still getting an unknown WINDOWS error.

Look - I hope you don't mind, but I think I'll stick with the parchments next time.

While we are becoming comfortable with mystery and paradox, we also need to reconnect to the imagination.

Every preacher knows that simply reading from Paul and then summarizing the main points makes for a quickly forgotten message. Instead, preachers and teachers make good use of metaphor and story to anchor their message in a living example.

Picture Jesus on the shores of the lake of Galilee. Can you see the water catching the reflection of the sky, while the seabirds wheel overhead? The crowd gathers by the shore as he steps into a boat and begins to tell a story.

Jesus used stories from everyday life, describing common events familiar to his readers like a sower sowing seed, or a fisherman casting his nets. Story continues to be a popular method for framing truth.

Tell the truth but tell it slant / Success in circuit lies;

Too bright for our infirm delight / The Truth's superb Surprise...
- Emily Dickinson*

CS Lewis wrote that “the imagination is the vehicle of understanding.” The reason that story is so useful is that images impact the brain at a level different from mere propositions. Pictures communicate on a variety of levels, and appeal to a variety of audiences. Stories from real life capture our attention by appealing to both heart and mind.

Where the modern world tried to escape images in favor of “pure” truth in propositions, we have learned that the old methods were the best. Many moderns were “iconoclasts,” trying to purge the faith by reducing it to the bare facts. Unfortunately, facts that are divorced from life are only facts. Jesus taught us by his incarnation that truth embodied in life will enter in at places that facts alone cannot reach.

The rediscovery of image based forms is powerfully impacting our culture. Movies are the new vehicles of culture. Multimedia presentations are common as vehicles of the Gospel. The current generation was raised on images and the Internet is not only shaping the way we communicate but the way we understand ourselves and our world.

Worship is increasingly anchored in the physical world, with images, dance and drama. The only danger here is the professionalization of worship. While no one wants to watch untrained dancers or listen to unskilled musicians, the pursuit of excellence has a way of taking us back to a passive spectator mentality where 95% of us watch while 5% perform.

In the modern world the watchword was “balance,” a Greek ideal. In the postmodern context the watchword is paradox, truth in dynamic tension. Sometimes apparently opposing truths must be held in tension. Jesus is both God and man. God is three in one. These concepts were boggling to moderns, who worked out elaborate formulas to explain the inexplicable. But the tension is not a problem to postmoderns.

While 66 percent of Americans believe there is no absolute truth, nearly three out of four Americans believe that “the Bible is the word of God and completely accurate in all that it teaches.” Holding mutually inconsistent ideas is not a problem for postmoderns.

God is both immanent and transcendent. The kingdom is now, but not yet. God chooses us, yet we have free will. We are both spiritual and physical.

Is light a particle or a wave? It depends on the observer, according to the new physics.

Where moderns looked for the resolution of such tensions, often emphasizing one side of the truth while minimizing the other, postmoderns are comfortable with mystery and paradox. They recognize that truth is often multi-faceted, and they recognize that our knowledge will remain limited.

One of the well known experiments that demonstrated the limits of our knowledge was performed nearly fifty years ago. Scientists attempting to measure a particle needed to know

both its size and its speed in order to understand its reaction with other particles. When they stopped the particle to measure its size, they could no longer know its speed. When they measured its speed, they could not measure its size.

This is important, because the mystical journey of union with Christ often brings more questions than answers. Furthermore, personal knowledge has characteristics that differ from scientific knowledge. While we may describe someone in startling detail, and even offer a psychological profile, it is not possible to truly know someone apart from love. The truth may not always be apparent to our mind, when it may be transparently clear to the heart.

“The heart has its reasons that reason cannot know.” Pascal, *Pensees*

Non Linear, Fluid, and Spontaneous order

Fancy upsetting the clock-like, mechanical perfection of a great service with an outpouring of the Spirit! The thing is unthinkable!^{xi}

Martyn Lloyd-Jones tongue in cheek comment on revival versus the lovely and efficient progress of a typical Sunday meeting is perhaps unfair in opposing the supernatural activity of God to the natural. But it is worth remembering that Lloyd-Jones saw the evolution of a technological culture at its height, and while the knowledge of clergy and laity increased, the church grew increasingly wealthy and spiritually cold.

The de-centralized, non-linear experience in the context of face-to-face community is strikingly different than the institutional setting. In a home meeting, for example, an “order of service” seems out of place.

In contrast, the highly structured and linear program of a Sunday public gathering has troubled me. Why?

The order that Paul describes in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14; Eph. 4) seems spontaneous and controlled by the Spirit. It is highly participatory. Any time we rely heavily on structure and preparation, we risk losing something important.

In virtually any formal Sunday service participation is highly limited, and the order is linear and predictable: intro, call to worship, worship and praise, announcements, the sermon, blessing and dismissal. And we say we aren't liturgical!

In the post-modern setting, even as groups get larger than a couple of dozen, things are much less linear and much less predictable. For some time I feared that this would obscure the center – the purpose of our gathering. In fact, the center becomes clearer, but it's a different center.

The linearity of the rational and structured model gives way to something much more difficult to define. Where modern Christian gatherings have a machine quality (though participation is severely limited) postmodern gatherings are more like a participatory art form, where everyone is a dancer or a painter. The center is defined in the process, and not by the end product, and "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

“If men and women today began by the thousands experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ in a transforming way, there would simply be no place for their expression of experience to fit into the present-day straitjackets of Christianity. Protestant or Catholic, neither one is structured to contain a mass of devoted people who long for spiritual depth. We are structured towards infancy.”^{xii}

In the postmodern gathering, it's no longer clear whether the center is "worship" or "word" (listen and learn) or just being together. The designated leaders may not be easily identifiable, though

they are still present. This is a very helpful direction in terms of the real work of the church and the purpose of our gathering, if we pay attention to Ephesians 4 and the dynamic Paul describes.

In a traditional gathering there may be space given to unplanned participation with testimonies or exhortations. Spontaneous elements can be integrated in a highly structured context.

But what about spontaneous connections? What about unplanned outcomes? The greater the structure and the greater the need for predictability, the more the outcome is limited by our own ability at engineering. Are we really SO confident in ourselves?

In any gathering, particularly in a gathering where the Holy Spirit is participant, there are many more possibilities than one or two leaders can envision. These will often be excluded. But what if the Lord had a different outcome in mind? What if it had been His intention to engineer events or connections that we did not imagine? Margaret Wheatley comments:

"There is a simpler way to organize human endeavour. It requires a new way of being in the world. It requires being in the world without fear. Being in the world with play and creativity. Seeking after what's possible. Being willing to learn and to be surprised.

"This simpler way to organize human endeavour requires a belief that the world is inherently orderly. Life seeks organization. It does not require us to organize it." ^{xiii}

As I reflect on the last year of our meeting with the church in our home, I realize that when we left behind the traditional center (the functions of word and worship and formal structures of participation) the center changed to the people themselves. We all became players, and the whole world was our stage (apologies to the Bard).

While we gather on Sunday afternoons, our relationships continue through the week. We bring groceries to one family. We meet in small clutches over coffee. We connect via phone and email. We pray with one another when a need arises. We gather a gift for someone who needs help with rent. We have a complex network of relationships, but the center is love for one another and for Jesus.

"Our task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God's active presence in their lives. Hence, the question that must guide all organizing activity in the church is not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they can no longer hear the voice of God who speaks in silence." ^{xiv}

When we rely less on formalized roles and structure, something interesting happens. Information flows along unexpected pathways instead of from the top down. Individuals who we thought lacked leadership gifts suddenly take responsibility in unusual ways. Where we worried things were becoming chaotic or that we were losing control, a new order arises. The model of a neural net is more appropriate than the machine model.

We don't need [managers] to make point to point connections to move information along linear pathways... We've been inspired this way by mechanistic models of the brain. Newer theories describe information as widely distributed, not limited to specific neuron sites. Instead, researchers have observed a more fluid pattern of electrical activity, with instructions distributed through a shifting network. ^{xv} **centered set?

Part III - The Gardeners

Rejection of Authority in Position

Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.
Phil.2:5-7

The empowerment of the early Christians by the Spirit of God sounded the death knell of the old priesthood. Suddenly all God's people were directly connected to the Head, with unmediated access to God.

Postmoderns reject authority in position in favor of authority in relationship. They do not buy into hierarchies, and they tend to assign authority only when it is earned. They don't respect leaders who are "over" but not "among." This aligns with the NT teaching on the priesthood of believers and Jesus teaching that "the greatest among you must be the servant of all."

Where the modern church echoed Reformation doctrine on "the priesthood of believers," priestly functions remained in the province of a specially trained professional class. The old priesthood remained, with a more friendly face, limiting participation to the few rather than equipping and releasing the many. As a consequence, the church as a whole has asked men and women to open their wallets and shut their mouths. Since the medium is the message, and large gatherings tend to be stages for the few, it's no wonder that believers do not feel empowered to reach their world!

Postmoderns may admit that hierarchy grants the illusion of structural efficiency, but they recognize that the model is from the technological world. In the biological world (postmoderns prefer the organic metaphors), life loves redundancy. *Why not* have fifty pastors in a community of two hundred adults? New models of leadership are rising among postmoderns. Peter Senge writes,

In the knowledge era, we will finally have to surrender the myth of leaders as isolated heroes commanding their organizations from on high. Top-down directives, even when they are implemented, reinforce an environment of fear, distrust, and internal competitiveness that reduces collaboration and cooperation. They foster compliance instead of commitment, yet only genuine commitment can bring about the courage, imagination, patience, and perseverance necessary in a knowledge-creating organization. For those reasons, leadership in the future will be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who share responsibility for creating the organization's future.

xvi

Some are building on the concept of team leadership to look for more open models. Some postmodern leaders like the metaphor of air traffic controller (ATC). An ATC doesn't fly the airplane, he only directs them. The primary function of an ATC is to clear aircraft for takeoff and landing, and ensure they stay on the safe path once airborne. The ATC is almost an invisible part of the process, but his or her role is essential in enabling the flight. Others prefer the metaphor of symphony conductor.

"A good conductor does not merely tell everyone what to do; rather he helps everyone so. For this he is not primarily a telling but a listening individual: even while the orchestra is performing loudly he is listening inwardly to silent music. He is not so much commanding as he is obedient."

"The conductor conducts by being conducted. He first hears, feels, loses himself in the silent music; then when he knows what it is he finds a way to help others hear it too. He knows that music is not made people playing instruments, but rather by music playing people."^{xvii}

Still others like a metaphor borrowed from the philosophical underpinnings of postmodern thought: the narrator. John O'Keefe of GINKWORLD.NET talks about the story:

No matter the story, no matter the ending, truth is in the narrative. All story is valid, all story – both individual and group – can add to the collective of the community. When we see life as simply a collection of story, we start to understand both our humanity and God's divinity. The narrative allows for creative, adaptable, nonlinear thinking with group input and an interactivity based on transparency and a living worldview. The narrative is, if you will, a new operating system for the church in the new millennium. It is both virtual and non-virtual, and it leads us to the future revitalizing the church. Some may view this style of vision development as "vision by chaos," and they would be right. But out of chaos, God creates order.

In this context listen to John's thoughts on the role of leadership:

Postmodern people are not looking for a CEO, CFO, COO CIO, or any other 3-letter combinations you can think of that starting with the big "C." Today, we are looking for the poet, the prophet, and the storyteller – the narrator. We don't "lead" people as much as listen to the needs of people and guide them along the path of faith. (The community direction is not based on the desires of one person, but grows from the leader's understanding of the collective vision.)

Furthermore, why use titles and labels that separate people in our community from one another? Why "pastor Bob" instead of just Bob? Labeling one person by their function damages the wholeness of the relationship, and limits the recognition that many others may be functioning as pastors in their workplace, or in other webs of connection.

At a deeper level there exists the unspoken assumption that leaders have more to give than others, and that those who "follow" need us more than we need them. In reality, the strong offer one gift, and the weak another. Until we die to the idea that we are somehow "ahead of" or "above" the community of faith around us, we will continue to be frustrated in our attempts to have an authentic community that combines real relationships with real discipleship. Jean Vanier writes,

We do not want two communities—the helpers and the helped; we want one. That is the theory, but in practice there is a tendency for the assistants to make their own community and be satisfied with that. Truly to make community with the poorest and identify with them is harder and demands a death to self.^{xviii}

Dorothy vs The Wiz

Brian McLaren in an article titled, "Dorothy on Leadership," (Rev. Magazine, Nov/Dec 2000) challenges the modern assumptions of leadership and the successful pastor as CEO, alpha male, and corporate hero. McLaren describes his own attempt to emulate the Hybels, Warrens, and Maxwells of the world, and his discovery that in fact size XXL didn't fit him, just as Saul's armor wasn't designed to fit David.

More to the point, McLaren saw a cultural clash; the models that worked in the modern church no longer function in the postmodern church. Perhaps they were never very good models anyway.

McLaren muses that as he considered the problem a scene in "The Wizard of Oz" came to mind. The scene is when little Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal that the great Wizard of Oz is a very average guy hiding behind an imposing image. The 1940's world was a world immersed in modernity, a world enamored with Superman and the Lone Ranger. Yet the film exposes the Wizard as a fraud, expressing a relentless doubt and displaying an early pang of discontent with

its dominant model of larger-than-life leadership. Brian wondered what image of leadership would replace the great Wizard.

The answer appeared in the next scene. No, it wasn't the lion, the scarecrow, or the tin man. It was Dorothy.

At first glance, Dorothy is all wrong as a model of leadership. She is the wrong gender (female) and the wrong age (young). Rather than being a person with all the answers, who knows what's up and where to go and what's what, she is herself lost, a seeker, often bewildered, and vulnerable. These characteristics would disqualify her from modern leadership. But they serve as her best credentials for postmodern leadership.^{xix}

McLaren identifies ten Wizardly characteristics of modern church leadership.

1. **Bible Analyst:** The modern Christian leader dissects the Bible because knowledge is power.
2. **Broadcaster:** an amplified voice increases perceived power and authority. Being slick, being smooth, being big, being "on the air" – that's what makes you a leader.
3. **Technician:** The organization (church, ministry, etc.) is a machine, and the leader knows how to work the machine, how to tweak it and maintain it. People become objects, and he's the subject.
4. **Warrior/Salesman:** Modern leadership is about conquest -- "winning" souls, launching "crusades," "taking" this city or country for Jesus. And it's about marketing, selling (and sometimes selling out).
5. **Careerist:** The modern leader earns credentials, grasps the bottom rung of the ladder, and climbs, climbs, climbs – whether he is a stock-boy-who-would-be-CEO or a young preacher on the rise.
6. **Problem-Solver:** Come to him, and he'll fix you.
7. **Apologist:** Come to him, and he'll tell you why he's right and your doubt or skepticism is wrong.
8. **Threat:** One of the most powerful weapons of the modern Christian leader has been the threat of exclusion. Through mocking caricatures and other techniques, a gifted orator can make you fear that if you don't agree with him, you'll be banished – like the Wizard bellowing threats from behind his curtain.
9. **Knower:** The modern Christian leader appears supremely confident in his opinions, perspectives, beliefs, systems, and formulations. While we have questions, he is the answer-man who knows.
10. **Solo Act:** There's only room for one in the Wizard's control booth, and there's only room for one at the top of the church org chart.

McLaren compares Dorothy to this modern picture, and the result is completely different. Dorothy is a bit disoriented, and she gathers other needy people in the belief that all their needs can be fulfilled in a common quest. Dorothy doesn't have all the answers and can't solve all the problems, but she believes that somehow they can journey together. McLaren lists a comparison of this post-Wiz leadership to the modern leadership model.

1. *From Bible analyst to spiritual sage*
2. *From Broadcaster to listener*
3. *From Technician to spiritual friend*
4. *From Warrior/Salesman to dancer*
5. *From Careerist to Amateur*
6. *From Problem Solver to Co-Quester*
7. *From Apologist to Apologizer*
8. *From Threat to Includer*
9. *From Knower to Seeker*
10. *From Solo Act to Team Builder*

Leadership by Wisdom and Example

The only way to propagate a message is to live it. Jim Wallis

Postmoderns respect love and wisdom, but are quick to reject the connection between knowledge and authority. Since knowledge is always limited and conditional, wisdom has more value. Wisdom always has practical application. As St. Francis put it, "Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words."

Modernism (and much of what was called "discipleship") stressed "getting the right answer" (as if knowing something automatically transfers to lifestyle); post-modernism stresses "does it work?" It is important to give people space and time, within the context of a community of faith, to journey with us. Thus, a teacher of great worth in post-modern society isn't the one with the right answers, but the one who can ask the right questions, and then walk the road of discovery with others.

The good news is that proclamation and demonstration of the reality of Jesus Christ has always been an integral part of New Testament teaching. Paul did not come proclaiming "persuasive words of wisdom, but with demonstration of the spirit and power" (1 Cor2:4) If we choose to adapt to postmodern possibilities, we will find ourselves in a unique position to have great effect in the cause of Jesus Christ.

John O'Keefe of Ginkworld.net relates that the core in the narrative includes the following:

I think primarily, you don't lead, you example. Notice I did not say, "you lead by example" – because that is somewhat impossible, and all the time doubtful. To "example" you simply are you.

One of the first things we need to do as a postmodern narrator is to let people function, and not just "give" them a function. This means you need to help people find their calling and gifts and let them develop that call and gift to best serve God, themselves and the community. It requires that you spend time with the people of the community, and not just a select few.

Where modern leaders were often valued for their knowledge and their delivery (read "sermons and tapes") postmodern leaders tend to be valued for their example. It's tough to argue with this as a more biblical position, since the NT values character over gifting (1 Cor.13).

Where moderns trust the expert, postmoderns tend to respond or react to a person's energy or person more than to what he or she actually says or does. If postmoderns trust the WHO of someone, the WHAT is negotiable and open to maturation. Postmoderns will go along for the ride and enjoy the process even when the goals are not clear so long as the WHO is trustworthy.

The open-ended question of how we follow Jesus in a post-modern society can best be dealt with in the Hebraic learning tradition, which views the teacher (leader, pastor, narrator or whatever) as a co-traveler with the learner on a shared journey towards truth. For the post-modern person, there is as much value in the question as there is in the answer, so reaching the goal becomes less of an obsession.

An old exercise in the dynamics of leadership goes like this: a group of leaders is asked to (quickly!) write down the titles of the three sermons that most powerfully affected their Christian lives. Then the same group is asked to write down the names of the three people who most powerfully affected their spiritual walk. Guess which list was quick, easy and encouraging, and which list prompted blank looks, head-scratching, and a certain level of anxiety?

We now know that human transformation does not happen through didacticism or through excessive certitude, but through the playful entertainment of another scripting of reality that may subvert the old given text and its interpretation and lead to the embrace of an alternative text and its redescription of reality. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home*

An axiom of the educational and consultant circles is that we learn the least from the "lecture" method of teaching. Involvement and participation in the learning process has always been far more effective than simply listening. In spite of this, leaders invest inordinate amounts of time preparing sermons that have close to zero impact in growing disciples.

In order for "acquired or experience-forged wisdom" to be truly accessible, however, there must be ongoing, mutual relationship. Every parent knows that the lecture method of teaching is all but hopeless; on the other hand, children watch us closely and learn by our example. "More is caught than taught." A similar adage has been variously attributed to either Native American or Chinese wisemen:

*"Tell me and I may forget,
Show me and I may remember,
Involve me and I will understand."*

Roland Allen, the great missiologist, wrote in "The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church," that

"Experience leads to learning "doctrine" and practices.

§ *Teachable moments.*

§ *Mosaic, not linear learning*

§ *Learning without experience equals intellectual theory doomed to fail: not because it is false but because it is not seen as valuable*

§ *A person's experience ought to always out-strip their education. This way they know what they don't know, why they need to know it and have an immediate place to apply it. This way motivation to learn and retention rates go way up.*"^{xx}

Leadership (whether called "pastoring" or not) needs to be seen as a spiritual gift, not a position of power, prestige, or a paycheck. Too often pastors and leaders suffer from the tyranny of the felt pressure to "grow workers", so that they cannot form genuine relationships with those around them. They feel that the weaker ones don't represent a good "investment" of time because of the lack of "return" for the machinery of the church's programs. Many pastors are needlessly lonely and isolated because of this, many others experience burnout or the failure of their most intimate relationships, and many believers feel rejected and unwanted because leaders tend to prefer the company of the more "useful" followers. (Note that Jesus choice of apostles is stunning from this point of view).

If leadership is seen as less about power and authority (as modeled in the hierarchical, top-down styles of corporations) and more about gift and character, then we all become pilgrims on the same journey.

The modern leader was the CEO, the manager of people and systems. Larry Crabb, in "The Safest Place on Earth,"^{xxi} comments that we have a choice: we can be either managers or mystics. Most of us feel somewhat out of place in community: we don't always feel safe and community itself is a mystery. We prefer structures we can understand and control. The problem is, God is less interested in predictability and control than we are! Or, from another perspective, He wants to be the one in control, and He doesn't always tell us in advance what He is up to! Or yet again, He may be more interested in the process than the goal; as leaders, we get fixated on goals.

Webs of Connection and Meaning

Some who read this will be wondering, "You are dismantling our old system, but you haven't given us a structure to replace it? How then do we establish order and avoid chaos?"

First, we have to trust that what appears to be chaos may hide an incipient new order. We may not see the new order as it is emerging.

"Our God is a God of beginnings. There is in him no redundancy or circularity. Thus, if his church wants to be faithful to his revelation, it will be completely mobile, fluid, renascent, bubbling, creative, inventive, adventurous, and imaginative."^{xxii} Jacques Ellul, *Resist the Powers*

Second, quantum physics is teaching us that we don't need to understand and control the variables before order emerges, and leadership often arises spontaneously where it isn't expected.

Third, we have envisioned leadership as an individual and lonely pursuit. This worked in the modern world of commerce, and it works for an audience, but the practice is damaging to organic and communal life.

Unfortunately, we have built congregations rather than communities, buildings rather than temples of living stones, and audiences rather than families of faith. Building communities requires completely different skills than building an audience. Clay Shirky writes,

"[Building a community] will require different skills and attitudes than those necessary to build an audience. Many of the expectations you make about the size, composition, and behavior of audiences when you are in a broadcast mode are actually damaging to community growth. To create an environment conducive to real community, you will have to operate more like a gardener than an architect."

In his article Clay outlines five things that broadcasters must consider in the connectivity age:

1. Audiences are built. Communities grow.
2. Communities face a tradeoff between size and focus.
3. Participation matters more than quality.
4. You may own the software, but the community owns itself.
5. The community will want to build. Help it, or at least let it.

Clay spells out some of the essential differences between a centrally controlled organization (what I tend to call "institution") versus a true community. Clay continues:

Broadcast connections can be created by a central organization, but [community] connections are created by the members for one another. Communities grow, rather than being built. New members of an audience are simply added to the existing pool, but new members of a community must be integrated. One of the most important things you can do to attract community is to give it a fertile environment in which to grow, and one of the most damaging things you can do is to try to force it to grow at a rapid pace or in a preset direction.

Small groups can be highly focused on some particular issue or identity, but such groups can't simply be inflated like a balloon, because *a large group is a different kind of thing than a small one*.

Community is made possible by [structure], but the value is created by its participants. If you think of yourself as owning a community when you merely own the infrastructure, you will be astonished at the vitriol you will face if you try to force that community into or out of certain behaviors.

Real community is a self-creating thing, with some magic spark, easy to recognize after the fact but impossible to produce on demand, that draws people together. Once those people have formed a community, however, they will act in the interests of the community, even if those aren't [the leaders or managers] interests.^{xxiii}

Part IV – More on the Gardeners

Models and Metaphors

We do need structure, and we will need new models of leadership.. but first we need new metaphors. The imaginative architecture of the modern world is collapsing, and we need a new architecture.

Models have a static and inflexible nature. If we start with models they seem to develop a life of their own that acts back on the original vision and pushes toward institutionalization.

Models are too easily reproduced, so we tend to adopt models apart from a context. Because they are highly rationalized, we often make the mistake of thinking that adopting a new model will bring a new result. In reality, a new model imposed on an old environment simply creates dissonance and dis-ease.

Furthermore, models push definition. Models require careful mapping, and as a result, we only account for the things that easily measured. But in a world where spirit and faith are primary, the things that are fixed and measurable are only a starting point. In a world where the task is love and the matter is humanity, we need to respect fluidity and mystery.

In “The Discoverers” Daniel Boorstin relates Ivan Turgenev saying to Leo Tolstoy,

"Would to God your horizon may broaden every day!
The people who bind themselves to systems are those
who are unable to encompass the whole truth and try to catch it by the tail;
a system is like the tail of truth, but truth is like a lizard;
it leaves its tail in your fingers and runs away knowing full
well that it will grow a new one in a twinkling."^{xxiv}

Finally, I wonder why we are so enamored with models, labels, and diagrams? I know why they attract me.. they give me the illusion of control. But control is precisely the problem of modernity.

In telling a story, metaphors help in developing an imaginative architecture that remains flexible and evokes rather than defines reality. Description always risks becoming definition, tending to an inflexibility that loses as much information as it includes.

In appealing to imagination, metaphor involves a playful attitude that engenders risk and creativity. These are qualities essential in learning and discovery, and learning and discovery are essential to life and growth and transformation.

It is this illusion that is at the heart of the modern mindset.. the illusion that we have the power to create spirit, that we in our human brilliance can establish the kingdom of God. But we cannot... we can only gain the kingdom in a lifetime of surrender...

*But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint--
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self surrender...*

TS Eliot, "Four Quartets"

Models, by their nature clear and defined, approach a kind of intellectual dishonesty. They imply a level of control we rarely attain, and a level of knowledge we don't have. Equally dangerous, they are too readily given away, too easy to reproduce, granting the listener the illusion that they now have the same degree of understanding or control, as if something as mysterious as community can be manufactured in the same way as a chocolate cake, by following the correct formula. It is this error that ends in confusing the vehicle for the journey, and the menu for the meal.

Not long ago Michael Toy mailed me a summary of a discussion with Doug Pagitt. Doug was proposing we ditch the word "leadership" with all its military implications, and find new language for talking about those who tend to communities. His preferred analogy was an organic gardener.

- take crap and use it to nourish things
- it isn't "dirt," it is soil, and the preparation and maintenance of the soil is really important
- things that are garbage are used to grow the garden
- vigilance is important
- be willing to take smaller fruit in order for it to be truly healthy
- gardening requires a systems understanding
- gardens die every winter and require replanting
- things can only grow in certain climates
- hybrids don't reproduce
- if you use miracle grow to start, you have to keep boosting the amount
- what you plant next to what is important
- you have very little to do with the success of the garden, photosynthesis is still a mystery, you can't make it grow, it is a miracle
- backs and knees are sore because you are down in the dirt, you don't stand above the garden
- we need to protect the garden from bunnies. Worms are good, bunnies are bad.
- organic fruit doesn't all look like the stuff in the market. Quality is over beauty, and there is no uniformity.. you share from the excess.

The evidence is in favor of leadership as an organic and communal enterprise. We can either be managers or mystics.

Leadership as Meaning Making

"What do you see as the two biggest problems facing leaders in the emerging church?"

"The first thing is lack of maps and few cartographers. Our modernist moorings, where being seminar junkies and bookaholics was rewarded with the right answers for our analytical questions, makes ministry in this emerging era very problematic. The fact is indigenous ministry will not tolerate book answers to our questions. And the maps may look very different from what we are used to.

"The second big issue is how to create more workable models of life change and transformation. We find the information revolution so sexy. But the reality is for all the information floating around in the church there seems to be a nearly inverse proportion of life change." Ron Martoia in an interview at Ginkworld.net.

Some will remark that this all sounds very nice, but what about the practical question: who decides the direction? Whether we have a map or not, we have decisions to make.

But what if leadership has more to do with finding meaning than in setting direction? Then the lack of a map may not be a big problem. In fact, in a time of transition, when the old maps have become useless, the confident leader who knows the way forward could be a handicap.

This means we must resist establishing a direction too early. We need leaders who are comfortable with chaos. "Strange attractors," in the world of physics cause order to emerge from apparent chaos. In building empowered communities "strange attractors" are like guiding principles or values and have more impact on individual behavior than good management. Leadership is de-centralized, less visible, but more potent than ever.

Postmodern leaders resist taking control because they know that focus is more important than individual behaviors. Taking control would mean replacing individual initiative, and re-centralizing authority, thus impeding the self-organizing dynamic of community. If our goal is to be in control, we needn't worry about the growth of community; a hierarchy will do. If our goal is to build a congregation, we only need a few leaders, who will soon burn out with the impossible task of holding it together. Instead, leaders need to know how to support ...

“.. self-organizing responses. People do not need the intricate directions, time lines, plans, and organization charts that we thought we had to give them. These are not how people accomplish good work; they are what impede contributions. But people do need a lot from their leaders. They need information, access, resources, trust, and follow-through. Leaders are necessary to foster experimentation, to help create connections across the organization, to feed the system with rich information from multiple sources-all while helping everyone stay clear on what we agreed we wanted to accomplish and who we wanted to be.”^{xxv}

If our goal is to grow communities and to empower ministry and life, we dare not build a hierarchy or settle for a congregation. We dare not be the savior or the one with all the answers, or the one who is indispensable.

Furthermore, postmodern leaders don't mind fluid structures and are comfortable with chaos because they are more interested in finding meaning than in building structures or establishing order. Margaret Wheatley comments that “We instinctively reach out to leaders who work with us in creating meaning.”^{xxvi}

Wilfred Drath and Charles Paulus pursued this direction in a book titled “Making Common Sense: Leadership As Meaning-Making in a Community of Practice.”^{xxvii}

Drath and Paulus argue that the old understanding of leadership rested on a set of assumptions about human nature and motivation. The dominance-cum-social-influence view assumes that humans are naturally at rest and that they need a motivation force to get them going. The meaning-making view assumes that people are naturally in motion, always doing something, and that they need, rather than motivation to act, *frameworks within which their actions make sense*.

From this theory appears an important difference and a powerful advantage. When we no longer see dominance and social influence as the basic activities of leadership, we no longer think of people in terms of leaders and followers. Instead, we can think of leadership as a process in which an entire community is engaged. "This enables us to disentangle power and authority from leadership. Authority is a tool for making sense of things, but so are other human tools such as values, work systems, and goal-path structures. Leadership, on the other hand, is the process through which people put these tools to work to create meaning." (p.6)

Drath and Paulus have helped me make sense of my own world; I have never been a dominant style leader, yet I find that people listen to me and come to me with questions. As a result I have become a mentor for a few, and rather than offering answers I have found that my role is to engage in honest dialogue and reflection with them and help them see their lives from a new

perspective. This ability to name and interpret life is an essential quality of discovery and growth, which in turn is at the heart of making meaning.

The traditional view of leadership not only unrealistically isolates certain behaviors from their context, but confuses authority and leadership, a confusion of means and ends. Understanding leadership as a communal process can help us work at empowering the entire community to participate in leadership, as well as sort out the differences between certain individual traits (dominance, intelligence, risk-taking etc.) Those we term "inspired" leaders are often the people who are able to express formulations of meaning on behalf of a community -- they name what people have in their minds and hearts -- a gift that can seem supernatural.

Too often our leadership models, so heavily tied up with views of authority toward efficiency and productivity, have resulted in our missing the communal context of leadership. We focused on what we could quantify and became like the captain of the ocean liner who carefully steered around the iceberg.. forgetting that what we don't know and can't control makes up the greater part of the unseen reality. Working with the unseen elements of growth requires intimate connection (community) and comfort with process and paradox.

Meaning-making involves both naming and interpreting, as well as values and commitments. We commit ourselves to what we value and what we understand as worthwhile. We make commitments to the meaning we see, to ways of naming and ways of being in the world. The process of leadership also involves these commitments.

The Context of Leadership: Preaching to Exiles

The usefulness of a metaphor for rereading our own context is that it is not claimed to be a one-on-one match to "reality," as though the metaphor of "exile" actually describes our situation. Rather a metaphor proceeds by having only an odd, playful, and ill-fitting match to its reality, the purpose of which is to illuminate and evoke dimensions of reality which will otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unexperienced. Walter Brueggemann, "Cadences of Home"^{xxviii}

Walter Brueggemann is an Old Testament scholar, and his recent work on interpretation, faithfulness and context is provocative and insightful. In chapter 7 Brueggemann examines models of the church in Scripture. He concludes that the model that dominates our experience is that which arose during the Israelite monarchy, a 400 year period in Israel's history. The conditions that produced that model and made it workable were swept away in a cultural geo-political upheaval.

That upheaval is not unlike that which we are experiencing in our own time. Similarly, the model that has dominated during the 21st century, a time of the rule of a Christian ethos, is now being swept away. There are signs of collapse everywhere. Even those who are not theologically reflective feel the tension and the "cognitive dissonance...." The dominant model of the western church in our western culture no longer connects with the culture. Worse, it has accommodated itself to culture to the point of idolatry and irrelevance.

But what will replace that model? Brueggemann finds other models in the Old Testament, rooted in times of exile and transition. "How will we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Even our familiar lands are rapidly becoming foreign to us. But this is a time to rediscover that "we are strangers and aliens here..."

Ezra is the great "new church start" leader. A new church means reformulating the faith in radical ways in the midst of a community that has to begin again. For Ezra, as for Moses, new church starts do

not aim at strategies for success, but at strategies for survival of an alternative community. What must survive is not simply the physical community; what must survive is an alternative community with an alternative memory and an alternative social perspective rooted in a peculiar text that is identified by a peculiar genealogy and signed by peculiar sacraments, by peculiar people not excessively beholden to the empire and not lusting after domestication into the empire.. ^{xxix}

Brueggemann argues that two sweeping sections of Scripture can help us shape a response to exiles. The book of Job is one; Isaiah 40-55 is the other.

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Behold your God."*

*"How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news
who publishes peace
who brings good news of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."*

As we deconstruct, and as we tentatively look for the presence of God in times of upheaval and uncertainty, we must find a way to utter those fresh, subversive, and liberating words. Because whatever we make of the current situation, we can't despair..

Because OUR GOD REIGNS.

Whatever has been lost, much more will be gained, because these three abide..

FAITH, HOPE, LOVE.

God's sovereign newness is wild and free, amazing and spontaneous, unpredictable and fresh.

But it will come.. OH YES.. it will surely appear.

Brueggemann closes his work: "We can only stand in readiness for what God may do.. that standing requires the use of intentional disciplines that in every case are marked by danger."

- DANGEROUS MEMORIES reaching all the way back to our father Abraham and our barren mother Sarah. Israel was tempted to substitute more reasonable and respectable memories rather than embrace the ambiguity and embarrassment of such stories and such messy heroes.
- DANGEROUS CRITICISM that mocks the deadly Empire. We must practice critical and reflective distance from our context. As in Isaiah, we need two kinds of critique. First, we need an ongoing religious critique of the tamed gods of the Empire (commercialized Christianity). Second, we need the political critique of entrenched power, wherever we find it.
- DANGEROUS PROMISES that imagine a shift of power in the world. Assimilated exiles who accept the claims of the Empire see it as an unmovable force. This makes critique impossible, and it becomes impossible to imagine a time when things will be different. But the promises of God are fresh, joyous, and sovereign. The kingdom of God will come. The poem of Isa.54:1-3 is first despairing, but then affirms a wild and outrageous hope.

- DANGEROUS SONGS that predict unexpected newness of life. The people with dangerous criticism and dangerous promises have an odd stance toward the way things are. They gather to sing a new song and to affirm a reality they have not fully experienced. As in the first century, worship is a political statement.
- DANGEROUS BREAD free of all imperial ovens. The manna in the desert, the food of Daniel, the feeding of the five thousand, the recognition of Jesus when he broke the bread by the fire.. Certain kinds of bread enslave us, and certain kinds bring freedom. But we know that the food God gives is reliable. Hardness of heart comes when we think the Empire controls all the resources.
- DANGEROUS DEPARTURES of heart and body and mind, leavings undertaken in trust and obedience. Israel looked forward to a time of freedom from exile. Similarly, we need to imagine a time when we leave behind consumerism, ambition, and militarism for other territory.
- DANGEROUS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT of how life really is. In the “glory” church that worships health and wealth it is easy to embrace a theology of the Spirit; less welcome is a theology of the Cross. But the kingdom of God opposes the comfortable religious claims of modernity where everything is neat and tidy, managed and controlled and we serve a tame God. Our God is good; but He is not safe. We sometimes cry out for the elusive Presence, and acknowledge like the early Apostle that we are “hungry and thirsty, homeless and ill treated.”

"The gospel, in these times of uncertainty, is a caring promise and a wondrous assertion that we belong and are intensely cared for."

*But now thus says the Lord;
He who created you, O Jacob,
He who formed you, O Israel:
Fear not! for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."*

Conclusion

"In times of profound change, the learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." Al Rogers

Many leaders are failing to engage postmodern culture because they have not understood the opportunities. Others have confused postmodernity as an intellectual movement and postmodern culture with its particular value set, like tolerance and moral relativity, and then tossed out the baby with the bathwater.

The purpose of this article was to clarify some of the points of contact between postmodern culture and the Gospel. While it is critical that we hold on to biblical values and purpose (function) it is equally important that we don't idolize the old forms. Forms change, the message remains the same.

If we view the Kingdom as transforming culture (a process that will only find its full expression and completion with the return of Jesus), then we are not only free to explore culturally relevant ways of expressing our faith, we are actually compelled to continually re-evaluate, re-imagine, and re-tell our Story in ways that our listeners can understand and embrace.

When cultures collide, as modernity and postmodernity are currently doing, those who find themselves caught in the collision can feel that their world no longer makes sense. Old paradigms collapse, and the frame of meaning is lost. Those who are meaning makers tend to be listeners and observers, and they join the process of communal searching and learn to ride the shock

waves.. they contextualize meaning and discover a new way of making sense of the new world. They arrive at a liminal place.. a place between the two cultures where new possibilities arise.

Mort Meyerson, chairman of Perot Systems, says that the primary task of being a leader is to make sure that the organization knows itself. Margaret Wheatley comments that "we must realize that our task is to call people together often, so that everyone gains clarity about who we are, who we've just become, who we still want to be... Organizations that are clear at their core hold themselves together because of their deep congruence. People are then free to explore new avenues of activity, new ventures and customers, in ways that make sense for the organization."^{xxx}

The challenge is clear: to effectively engage our culture while maintaining our identity as the people of God, a people (community) on a journey. Our failure to do this, and to explore new ways of faithfully expressing the biblical call to discipleship (in both edification and evangelism as missional communities), will result in our becoming increasingly marginalized and irrelevant.

The role of leadership, as always, is critical. We need a new kind of leader, unconcerned about issues of marketing and structural maintenance and focused instead on discipleship and transformation, faithfulness, brotherhood and authenticity. We need to move beyond the confused entanglement of leadership and authority, and we need leaders who are willing to step down in the world. As Mark Strom put it,

Paul would not allow any human system or convention to hedge the communities against the risks of working out what it meant to live by the dying and rising of Christ. Such security would only throw the community back on their own resources and reinforce individual and communal boasting.... Paul urged leaders to imitate his personal example of how the message of Jesus inverted status... He refused to show favouritism towards individuals or *ekklesiai*. The gospel offered him rights, but he refused them.^{xxxi}

Similarly, Richard Quebedeaux writes that, "Because the very foundations of American society, including the family, are crumbling, we MUST seek and find strong leaders. But we need a new kind of leader - beyond the celebrity, beyond the pragmatist - to show us the way to the abundant life, the good life that God originally intended for his children and still longs for us to have." He continues,

"No medium or method of conveying the Christian gospel can meet people's basic needs for recognition, involvement, worthiness, growth, and indeed salvation itself without the loving give and take of person-to-person interaction over a long period of time. This is what community really means, and this is exactly where popular religion and its leaders are not successful.

"In a secular society, in a world where homelessness is the norm, the only way religion can really be "successful" is to provide a home for the homeless -- a family that includes not just my kind of people, but God's kind of people, who love him with everything they have, and who love their neighbour as much as they love themselves. The church does need to become God's ideal family, both in word and in deed." ^{xxxii}

ⁱ Kelly, Gerard. *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting our Routes*. IVP: 1998

ⁱⁱ Wallis, Jim. *The Call to Conversion*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982. P. 126

ⁱⁱⁱ Girard, Robert. *Brethren, Hang Together: Restructuring the Church for Relationships*. Zondervan, 1979.

^{iv} Petersen, Jim. *Church Without Walls*. Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1992. P. 150

^v "Cry of a Tiny Babe," from the album "Nothing But a Burning Light" True North Records, 1991

^{vi} Cooke, Graham. *A Divine Confrontation*. Destiny Image, 1999.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Fee, Gordon. *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

^{ix} Wheatley, Margaret. *A Simpler Way*. Berrett-Koehler, 1998.

^x Dickinson, Emily. *Complete Poems*. Little Brown and Co., 1976.

^{xi} Lloyd-Jones, Martyn "The Sovereign Spirit: Discerning His Gifts." In *Christianity Today*, June, 1985.

^{xii} Cosby, Gordon. Interview in *Cutting Edge Magazine*, Fall, 2001.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Nouwen, Henri. *The Way of the Heart*. Ballantine, 1981.

^{xv} Wheatley, Margaret. *Leadership and the New Science*. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler, 1992.

^{xvi} Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

^{xvii} Potok, Chaim. *My First 79 Years: Isaac Stern*. Da Capo Press, 2001.

^{xviii} Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989. P.30

^{xix} McLaren, Brian. *Dorothy on Leadership*. Rev. Magazine, Nov/Dec 2000.

^{xx} Allen, Roland. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*. New York: World Dominion Press, 1927.

^{xxi} Crabb, Larry. *The Safest Place on Earth*. Word Publishing, 1999.

^{xxii} Ringma, Charles. *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul*. Navpress: 2000.

^{xxiii} *September 9, 2002 on the 'Networks, Economics, and Culture' mailing list*

^{xxiv} Boorstin, Daniel. "The Geography of the Imagination," In *The Discoverers*. New York: JM Dent and Sons, 1984.

^{xxv} Wheatley, Margaret. "Goodbye Command and Control." In "Leader to Leader." No.5, Summer, 1997.

^{xxvi} Wheatley, Margaret. *A Simpler Way*. Op Cit.

^{xxvii} Drath, Wilfred and Paulus, Charles. *Making Common Sense*. Center for Creative Leadership, 1994.

^{xxviii} Brueggemann, Walter. *Cadences of Home*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

^{xxix} Ibid.

^{xxx} Wheatley, Margaret. "Goodbye Command and Control." Op Cit.

Leonard Hjalmarson is the founder of <http://www.nextreformation.com> and you can write to him at next1@nextreformation.com

Thanks to Rob McAlpine for his early input in this article. Rob resides in Winnipeg, Manitoba and for some reason prefers the MacIntosh to the PC. You can write to Rob at rob@rainyday.ca

^{xxxi} Strom, Mark. *Reframing Paul*. IVP, 2000.

^{xxxii} Quebedeaux, Richard. *By What Authority: the Rise of Personality Cults in American Christianity*. HarperCollins, 1982. Pp. 182-183.