

The church in the postmodern transition

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I do not claim to be a scholar of postmodernism. But it is impossible to work at the missiological task of the church in the latter part of the twentieth century without engaging the visions and sensibilities of what is variously called postmodernity, the postmodern condition, or the postmodern transition. While Bishop Newbigin did not often speak directly of postmodernism or postmodernity, his last great project to invite a missionary encounter of the gospel with modern Western culture stood upon the ground of the emerging postmodern critique of the most fundamental confidences of the modern age. The perspective of cross-cultural missionary experience that he brought to the encounter only strengthened the postmodern texture of his vision.

What I do understand about postmodernity has been helped along by numerous colleagues who themselves have studied its philosophical assumptions and social characteristics at some depth. Many of these are colleagues in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America with whom I have worked to fashion a vision for the church in a post-Christendom as well as postmodern world. For many of us the encounter of the gospel with Western culture precipitates the question of the church as a central challenge, even in North America where churches seem to be doing so well. Whatever surface successes remain, the truth is that beneath that surface lies a severe crisis of meaning and identity. There is a churning quest for a rationale for being church, and a hunger for the experience of being the kind of church for which there is a compelling reason.

The themes of postmodern transition and ecclesial identity come together in a newly emerging movement among younger “Generation X” pastors and church leaders in the USA and Canada. This generation knows itself to be a generation formed within the postmodern condition, or as they prefer to call it, the postmodern transition.¹ They recognize more intuitively than the rest of us that “postmodern” designates a movement away from something and toward something else not yet present or identifiable. This is an on-the-way place for the culture, not an assured ending place. They know this to be liminal time.² In the midst of it, they have a keen sense that ministry and evangelism in this time involves a dialogue among church, gospel, and culture, a dialogue unlike any that has gone before. They have not been willing to accept the forms of church inherited from the Christendom- or Enlightenment-shaped world, not even the so-called contemporary or seeker-oriented church of the baby boomers which embodies the values of modernity that are now passing. This rising generation of leaders poses instead some fundamental questions about the nature of community and truth in mission. Their experience of Christian faith within the postmodern transition suggests that a contextual, missional ecclesiology must be at the center of the agenda for us all.

It is in light of these quests for knowing the meaning and vitality of the church that I have chosen to address “the church in the postmodern transition.” This means that I am not so much looking

at “Enlightenment, Modernity, and Postmodernity” from a historical or analytical point of view. Rather, I am addressing what I take to be a fundamental missiological challenge at the present time in view of that sociocultural heritage. By taking up the issue of an ecclesiology for such a setting, I hope to address some of the who, why, where, and how questions regarding the church's calling to be the sent people of God. I would like to do this by identifying three dynamics which I believe are made crucial for the church in light of the current moment, given what we inherit from the shaping forces of Enlightenment and modernity in the past and what faces us in the emerging postmodern present and future.

Truly the Community

I take the phrase from the title of one of Marva Dawn's books.³ By it I mean to say that somehow the forms of church we have inherited have construed church in a very different way from being a community, and the recovery of being community is fundamental for the church at the present time. The newly arising generation certainly will not tolerate anything less. More than that, it is what we discover in the Scriptures to be the crucial element in the Holy Spirit's presence in the world, to fashion the church as “a body of people sent on a mission” (to borrow a phrase from David Bosch in a 1991 lecture series).

Such a vision has been thwarted and muted under other conceptions of church which have shaped how we do things. The subtle notion that the church is “a place where certain things happen” has held increasing sway since the time of the Reformation. In the American context this has persisted, but under forces peculiar to the USA this shaping notion has taken an additional turn, an economic one. Essentially, two hundred years of history have seen the churches shaped more and more around a conception of what a church is that is shared by people in churches as well as outside them: the church is “a vendor of religious services and goods.”⁴ The grammar of everyday conversation illustrates how deeply this is ingrained. In a recent newspaper article about one church's decision regarding its historic facility and a proposed rebuilding project, there is an example: “For others associated with Graafschap Christian Reformed Church, a church must pay the price to keep up with the times and better serve its congregation.” Something called “church” has the function of serving something called “its congregation.” In this vendor model, members of the congregation are reduced to consumers of services, staff and leaders are the production managers and sales force, the goal becomes member (a.k.a. customer) recruitment, and the gospel becomes a commodity needing to be appropriately packaged and marketed. The relationship between a church and its members is shaped around a pattern of vendor–consumer, provider–client relationships.

Here, I believe, is where we have inherited some of the harshest consequences of the Enlightenment. Critics of post-Enlightenment modernity, including Newbigin, have noted many of its features that beg for the gospel's missionary encounter: its confidence in autonomous human reason, its belief in the individual as the unit of identity and survival, its dichotomy between public facts and private opinions, and its reliance on effect and progress as the validation of what is right and true. But in modernity it is also the case that the rationalization of social systems and the process of routinization within social institutions have had a profound effect on the forms of church we inherit, and this needs as radical an engagement. Recent sociological interpretation of the history of churches in America suggests that the same rational choice theory which explains economics explains also the experience of churches.⁵ As has been

the case in other arenas as well, the economic part of life has come to define a whole range of institutions and organizations, not merely the commercial ones. The church is among them.

So the question is, What is the church? Is it an entity that exists for its members, to nurture their faith and give opportunities for their service? Or is it the members themselves who exist for the purposes God has in mind for them? Between the two views there lies a deep gulf. At present it is the first that defines the church and sets in motion its patterns of language and practice. But the church's birthright, possessed by all the people of God, is that it is a divinely called and sent community.

Several aspects of a reemerging vision for being truly the community have begun to take shape.⁶ First, to be community means to possess a collective discipleship. The normal habit of speech, teaching, preaching, and even group Bible discussion is to emphasize the way biblical text challenge and nourish growth in each individual's relationship with God and response to the gospel. In contrast to this the church is called into being to be a discerning community which receives the scriptural text as addressed to it corporately, which seeks the mind of the Spirit for its corporate calling and mission, which moves as one body in its expression of the gospel. The church is not a mere collectivity of individual disciples but together is a follower of Christ, in whose calling each one participates. The individual is not lost, but rather found, in its bondedness within the community.

Second, to be community means to gather for worship together. As a friend of mine has put it, worship has become a substitute for the church. Worship is something one goes to, something provided by professional staff. To be community again will invert this pattern. The church is the community. Worship is something that community does.

This makes a difference in the character of worship. It has the quality of being gathered up out of the collective praise and adoration and confession and pleading and hearing and responding of the community. This will mean, of course, a shift from professional planning and production toward worship that is the fruit of the work (*leitourgia*) of the laity to give expression to their praise. Persons of the community gifted for the kind of leadership that sees, values, empowers, and puts to voice the praise of the whole people will guide the shape and expression of the worship moments in the community's life.

Third, to be community means to remain community while scattered. The question, Where is your church? requires a better answer than the geographic location of the facility. Where are the people who are that community? Where are they working, living, playing? Essential to a notion of community is a new recognition that the missional placement of a congregation lies precisely within the workplaces and multiple social worlds the people inhabit day to day. And with that comes a new appreciation that when separated to all those daily worlds, the community is still a community, bound the same way to each other and responsible together to be a community that gives expression to the gospel. The church that is truly the community will be one in which there is a seamless harmony between its gathered moments and its scattered ones.

It is obvious that the portrait of community given here requires a serious and sustained critique of clericalism and a reversal of its manifestations in the life of churches that are now essentially

“owned” by the clergy. Bishop Newbigin himself flagged this issue as one of the most crucial for the church living beyond Christendom, but this has tended to be missed by most of his readers.⁷ New images and practices of leadership will have to emerge in which leaders find the formation and discipling of the community to be the first priority. What is needed is leadership that is an extension of the community, not a displacement of it.

Community of the True

If this rising generation is one hungry for connection, as so many have observed, it is also eager to find meaning. The acid test for people who claim to offer it is authenticity. It is not enough for the church merely to be community for people, hungry as they may be for even the most minimal sort of human connection. As David Lowes Watson has observed, the intimacy experienced in the small-group movement has the potential to be a mere “spiritual amphetamine,” producing an immediate high but offering no sustaining life.⁸ His own efforts to cultivate Covenant Discipleship Groups on the pattern of John Wesley’s class meetings strike the necessary chord: “Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability.”⁹ The challenge is to be a community that bears the shape of the gospel, that is molded by the Spirit to represent distinctly the regime of God. The vision is to be genuinely Christian community.

I express that with the language of truth, but prefer to speak of being a community of the “true,” a community that is “true to the truth.” To say it this way is to stress that it is not a matter of holding the truth as a body of ideas, espoused, affirmed, and defended. But it is to embody a pattern of thoughts, language, and practices that is true to the truth that is Jesus the Christ.

I am using the term “true” here in the same sense that a carpenter might use it about the wall of a building when measured against a plumb line to determine whether it is vertically true. To say that a wall is vertical does not mean that the wall is the standard for being vertical. Rather it means that it corresponds to that standard which its builder has intended to reflect.

There are distinct ecclesiological and missiological reasons for speaking in this way. It is a more modest way of understanding Christian identity to recognize that truth can never be so fully and rightly grasped that what is expressed is that truth. Not only the spirit of the postmodern age but the spirit of the cross-cultural missionary warn us to be humble about it. Christians do believe (to use a phrase from the television program *The X-Files*) that “the truth is out there.” That is, much as we must come to agree with the postmodern critique of modernity’s confidence in reason, and the postmodern assertion that there is no one rationally defensible version of the truth and that all our claims to know it and efforts to state it are particular and provisional, nevertheless it is inherent to Christian faith that something is believed with “universal intent” and believed to have correspondence to some truth that actually is so.

This ultimate conviction of Christians is rooted in the incarnation. Wherever else *The X-Files’* search may take agents Mulder and Scully – investigating extraterrestrials, examining the paranormal, etc. – Christian faith is birthed by the presence among us at one time and place of one who embodied in himself the “truth that is out there.” It is embodied and imbedded “in here” within the path of normal experience in an incarnation of the divine person. He said of himself, I am the truth.

The church knows that it does not embody the truth in the same way that Jesus is the truth. So while we do not claim for our creeds and actions that they are the truth, yet by embodying what is true to that truth, in all the particularity inherent in our doing so, we do claim that they correspond to the truth, which is the person Jesus. On that basis and against that standard, our creeds and actions are open to testing by all who observe and listen.

The recovery of the church's identity as community of the true rests on three perspectives about truth. First, truth is personal. If Jesus embodied it in his incarnation, truth is personal because he is that truth. In relationship and the revealing of a person to another it is known. Here is drawn into the picture the personal dimension of knowing which Michael Polanyi depicted and which Newbigin affirmed so often, owing in no small measure to the influence of John Oman in his theologically formative years. Oman had stressed the personhood of God, and Newbigin found that to provide a bedrock perspective for all his subsequent work.

Under the Enlightenment the West experienced a profound liberation of human reason. To speak of revelation does not deny the fruit the Enlightenment has produced nor that human reason is a source of the knowledge of truth. But it is to say that knowledge from human reason is always partial, and more than that, it is vulnerable to the bias and design of the interpreting human person or community. The postmodern hermeneutic of suspicion, which suspects all claims to knowing truth as expressions of a will to power, plays into this picture of things as a warning against confidence in the promise of human rationality.

Truth, if personal, is known in the relationship of persons. Here Newbigin's phrase about the revealing of God which comes to us in the form of Scriptures captures something important: the Bible is "that body of literature which – primarily but not only in narrative form – renders accessible to us the character and actions and purposes of God."¹⁰ God as personal can and does act and choose the time and place of those actions, and those actions are that by which and in which God's character and purposes become known to other persons. In the end we are reminded that truth is then not some static, objective thing existing independently somewhere, but it is wrapped up in a willing, acting divine person.

Second, truth is perspectival. This is different from acknowledging that our knowing is always partial, or tainted. It surely is both. But to say that truth is perspectival is to affirm that it is inherent in the circumstances of life, created as they are by the one who is the truth, that human existence is by nature particular, contextual, and relational, and all knowing is relative to the language and culture creations that human societies establish, adapt, and transmit. Perhaps the point Newbigin made in *Foolishness to the Greeks* puts it most emphatically: "Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion."¹¹

Here is the vantage point of those who have experienced the missionary encounters of the gospel with the world of diverse human cultures that has companionship with postmodern sensibilities. Claims to truth beyond the particularities that shape all human life are relativized in both views. But in neither is there a necessary absolute relativity (which would be a contradiction in terms, at

any rate). Rather, the relativity of knowing forces a communal and dialogical approach to all truth seeking. For the church as community of the true, that means at least two things: being true happens in mutual accountability between communities of the true, and being true happens in the conversation with persons beyond the Christian community at the frontiers where Jesus as the truth is becoming known.

Third, truth is practiced. To objectify truth is to distance oneself or one's community from personal responsibility. Truth not lived, meaning that it is not believed with the will, can hardly claim to be truth. Philip Kenneson makes this point well in his essay entitled "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too!"¹² The church's vision of truth must mean that the verbs "believe" and "obey" become synonyms once again, as they were for the writer to the Hebrews and for Jesus himself. Only a practiced truth bears the stamp of authenticity and livability. In the postmodern transition, people do not look for better (objective!) arguments about God's presence or purposes, but they look for demonstrations of it being lived in terms of contemporary life.

In Missional Relationship

The church is not merely a community, nor is it enough for it to be a distinctly Christian community whose life and character increasingly correspond to the truth. It is a sent community. Its very presence as a distinct community is part of that for which it is sent, so even its attentiveness to being truly the community and the community of the true begins to fulfill its missional character. But it is called and sent to be present within the flow of the world's life, and in its life, deeds, and words to represent there the regime of the goodness of God.

Newbigin's conception of mission and of the church as missionary by nature takes on graphic form in his phrase "the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel."¹³ Here he illustrated that the church is not merely an agency of volunteers for certain tasks of mission. Rather, its very being is the lens through which people view and comprehend the gospel. For the church, this raises the importance of the challenges of community and truth already mentioned. And it means for any particular church that the ongoing dialogue between the gospel and the culture of which it is a part goes on most deeply and sharply precisely within that church. This inward dialogue between the gospel and the community's culture, Newbigin would frequently say, is logically prior to the outward one in which the church is engaged with its world.

But outward it does and must become, and apart from that its own inward dialogue will be impossible. The church which is the fruit of the conversion encounter of the gospel with its particular culture is made by that encounter to be the demonstration of the life the gospel offers and the conversion it challenges. Out of that wellspring of its transformed life comes its deeds in response to the vision of justice and peace which the gospel announces to be the intention of God for the world. Out of it comes also the clear and joyous announcement of the knowledge of God found in the person of Jesus the Christ. This holistic mission of life, deed, and word comprises the identity – the missional identity – of the church today. The post-Christian age awaits such a visible demonstration, tangible expression, and clear articulation of the gospel.

When talking about the way the church's calling sends it to re-present the reign of God, the eschatological dimension of it cannot be far away. The sent community is in a very real sense a

precedent community, one which shows the intrusion of God's future. The missionary and eschatological qualities of the church have always been closely joined in Newbigin's thought. This was in evidence in his early, but still fresh, portrait of the church in *The Household of God*.¹⁴ The church in this precedent sense is the foretaste community, a harbinger of the coming springtime, a herald of what is on the way.

The missionary and eschatological way of the church will need to be relearned. The long history of Christendom, including the recent phases of it as the functional reality in societies for which the legal forms have ceased, taught us to think in other terms. Now, without props from the social order and without a set role to play as its chaplain, whole new possibilities open up for the reemergence of the Western church's missionary identity.

But there are many potential pitfalls, most of all the multiple forms of the temptation to seize again some way of being for the society its orienting vision, to regain in subtle ways the lost position that so long gave the church large measures of power and privilege. It is here that I question the wisdom or appropriateness of speaking, as Newbigin tended to do in his later years, about the way "the gospel as public truth" might be envisioned to have bearing on the forms of contemporary secular societies. The phrase itself, it seems to me, has several potential points of reference in light of the whole of Newbigin's work. If by "the gospel as public truth" he means that the gospel is fundamentally a news report, an announcement of the public events of God's actions as they have their center in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and if he means to assert that those events are decidedly world news bearing significance for the whole of the world's life and are thus not to be relegated to the religion page, then his assertions must be taken with seriousness regarding the forms of Christian life and community and witness such a news report implicates. Such a report is to be embodied and portrayed in the public life of the Christian community, and testimony to it given in affirmation and critique among the powers of the world. In these respects the phrase is an important one, and one which has continuity with major themes throughout Newbigin's writings.

But if he means by it that the Christian vision is to be commended as a proposed basis for the unity and coherence of today's secular society, as the vision which alone is capable of giving the grounds for proper tolerance of all religions and a foundation for relating together the plural peoples of the society, then it seems to me that this moves once again in the direction of a certain kind of Christendom arrangement, albeit in a new form. On those occasions when Newbigin in fact made just this sort of move (and I can think of three such occasions in the USA in the 1990s when I myself was present), there were fundamental questions not answered. On what basis might, or could, the Christian vision be embraced or adopted by today's secular, pluralist Western societies? For a variety of reasons, Christians might want that or seek it, and might believe that it would be in the best interest of the society to do so. But why, on its principles, would or could the society choose to take the Christian vision as the basis for its unity and coherence? Unless, of course, it came to be converted to Christ, who is the center of the vision, in vast numbers!

To imagine that is to show the problem with the proposal. It suggests that a society might embrace the Christian vision as its basis quite apart from adherence to and allegiance toward Jesus the Christ. To imagine such a thing would be nonsensical, from the point of view of today's

Western societies as well as that of the Christian faith. This, it seems to me, was precisely the problem with Christendom in the end, that finally the society had the shell of the Christian faith's perspective and ethos while no longer holding its essential faith. To use Max WEber's image, the gate to the iron cage was then flung open and has been ripped from its hinges. There's no putting it back. The captives are loose, and they won't be coming back to rebuild the cage.

For the church to return in spirit or form to a kind of relationship with the wider society that is rooted in the memory or remnants of Christendom will be to forfeit the next stage of its calling. A missional relationship implies life as a "parallel" community.¹³ Such a community is not allergic to being a community of affinity with its surrounding communities, sharing common aspirations and quests as a people. Neither is it allergic to being a community of distinction from its surrounding communities, marching to the beat of a drummer who sometimes says dance when there is despair, sometimes says mourn when there is glee, and sometimes says refuse when all others move toward the destruction of life and hope.

Conclusion

In this postmodern transition, I have suggested, these three features will be required of the church: that it be truly the community, that it be a community of the true, and that it live in missional relationship with the world where it lives. The Spirit, I believe, moves us to such a journey and goes with us on the Way.

Notes

1. Jimmy Long's book *Generating Hope* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997) shows the correspondence between the literature on postmodernity and that on so-called Generation X. Bringing the two analyses together forms the basis for his helpful proposals for ministry among a postmodern generation.
2. See Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missionary Congregations, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), for the use of liminality as a lens for interpreting the current cultural situation.
3. Marva J. Dawn, *Truly the Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). The original title, *The Hilarity of Community: Romans 12 and How to Be the Church*, was changed to the current title in 1997.
4. For a more complete survey of the way this has emerged and the consequences of it, see George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 333–46, and Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), especially chap. 4. See also Philip D. Kenneson and James L. Street, *Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).
5. For a defense of this line of interpretation, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
6. The following three aspects of community, along with several others, are more fully developed in George R. Hunsberger, "Features of the Missional Church: Some Directions and Pathways," *Reformed Review* 52, no. I (autumn 1998): 5–13.

7. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; and Geneva: WCC, 1986), pp. 141ff.
8. David Lowes Watson, *God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 30–31.
9. David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991).
10. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 59.
11. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 4.
12. Philip D. Kenneson, “There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing, Too!” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).
13. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; and Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989), pp. 222–33.
14. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship, 1954). See chap. 5, “Christ in You, the Hope of Glory,” and chap. 6, “Unto All the Nations.”
15. This phrase was suggested by Mary Jo Leddy at a conference of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America in March 1996. The papers of the conference, including the one presented by Leddy, are published in *Confident Witness – Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).