

MINISTRY TO POSTMODERN PEOPLE

2 Samuel 12:1-7, Acts 19:8-9, Selected Texts (NASB)

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The era of history known as the modern period has dominated the West for centuries and is now coming to a close. It has given birth to the postmodern period, which is now being endlessly analyzed. I myself presented a four-part analysis of postmodernity entitled *The Sin of the Century* in 2003 which is available on our web site at www.breakfree.org. I do not intend to repeat that material here. A much more pressing question is how to minister effectively in a postmodern environment, so I want to reveal some of the tendencies and dysfunctions of postmodern people and explore ways to help them grow into committed disciples.

1. THE POSTMODERN DYSFUNCTION REGARDING TRUTH

We all wish we could simply explain the gospel to people and have them receive it but the world, the flesh, and the Devil always erect barriers. Postmodern people try to disconnect themselves from the very concept of objective truth. Take a baseball umpire for example. A premodern umpire sees a good pitch and calls a strike: "It's a strike!" He thinks of that reality as obvious to all. He's just the one pointing it out at that moment. In premodern times ideas of morality and God were simply taken for granted as self-evident, even when erroneous.

The modern umpire sees the pitch and says: "I observe it as a strike!" The modern period was marked by science and philosophy based on the empirical method. It was all about detached observation of the universe and logical thinking. Truth was considered to be the fruit of valid observations. By contrast the postmodern umpire sees a good pitch and says: "It's not a strike until I say it's a strike!" Now we are two steps away from objective truth. The postmodern does not even admit that the pitch is objectively a strike or not. His idea is that truth does not even exist except as he experiences it and affirms it subjectively.

That's why when we share the good news of Christ with postmoderns their most common response is: "That's your truth, not mine." They sternly assert that neither objective truth nor absolute morality can be known--until they interact with their banker, their teacher, a policeman, or a surgeon. Like everyone else postmoderns want their bank statements to be correct, their grades to be fair, their traffic tickets to be based on law, and their medical treatments to follow protocols to the letter! So reaching them with the gospel is all about getting them to flip-flop from the "my truth/your truth game" to the "this is real life game." Postmoderns have a dysfunction regarding truth but it is not insurmountable.

2. THE RIGHT BRAIN/LEFT BRAIN ISSUE

A brief case study will help us see the distinction. What is the truth about cars? The modern answers that question by running the car through test machinery and ultimately by taking

it apart. The postmodern would probably try to discover the truth about cars by flying above a car and watching it run around town all day in its native environment. Ultimately the postmodern wants to drive it himself. The modern is left-brained/analytical, the postmodern is right-brained/synthetic. Left-brained people were prized during the modern period for being logical and rational. Postmodernity prizes and emphasizes artistic and intuitive people.

During the modern period our sermons were mostly expository, analytical, exegetical, and rational. It was all about explaining. Pastor John MacArthur, from whom I once studied, is a good example of a typical left-brained preacher. By contrast, Max Lucado is the preacher for right-brained people. His use of story and emotional impact matches their needs exactly. For most of the modern era our left-brained church members left church after a good analytical sermon with a deep sense of satisfaction. Our right-brained members heard the same set of truths, got the point, but left feeling like they had trouble relating to it. Our congregations have always been filled with people of both cognitive styles, but at this moment the modern left-brained predominance is giving way to postmodern right-brained tendencies.

Paul the Apostle was one of the greatest left-brained theologians of all time. Watch him work in Acts 19:8-9: **"And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus."** Paul went to a generally receptive audience by going to the synagogue in every city on his missionary travels. In that environment it was very effective to read Scripture to people, explain its meaning, and reason with them to believe in their Messiah. It worked beautifully. In Athens Paul used less Scripture but presented Christ in the Areopagus to thoughtful Greeks using a very sophisticated pattern of logical reasoning (Acts 17).

But what do we do when the people to whom we are speaking come with a massive dysfunction with regard to the concept of truth itself? We must slip the objective truths of Scripture past their defenses by using their delight in pictures, stories, and right-brained thinking. The prophet Nathan faced a man who had a powerful set of reasons to resist the spiritual truth about himself as seen in 2 Samuel 12:1-7: **"Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, 'There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. /The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. /But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb /Which he bought and nourished; /And it grew up together with him and his children. /It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, /And was like a daughter to him. /Now a traveler came to the rich man, /And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, /To prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; /Rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.' Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.' Nathan then said to David, 'You are the man.'"**

Nathan could have sat with David and done a rational analysis of his behavior using the Ten Commandments and would probably have been thrown out on his ear because David was

already on his guard against that truth. The story made the truth land in David's mind and heart with full force and David repented. The Jews with whom Paul reasoned also felt the truth land with full force, and they repented too.

At the dawn of the postmodern era we can no longer afford to do only analytical left-brained modern sermons. We must also do synthetic right-brained postmodern sermons. Better yet, our sermons and lessons should encompass the needs of everyone in the same message.

4. SCRATCH COOKING WITH "EPIC"

In fact, we are not merely going to have to modify the strategic patterns of our ministries to address these changes in people's needs, we are going to have to go back to the drawing board and raise up fresh patterns from scratch. The moment we talk of changing ministry patterns the specter of fear rises from the pit of despair and makes an accusation: "If you change the patterns of ministry you are being unfaithful." On the contrary, the church throughout the millennia has shifted strategic patterns while upholding the truth of God's word and the pursuit of Christ's mission. There are, of course, many today who have compromised the truth in order to fill seats and budgets, but there is no intrinsic reason why we cannot fully uphold the prophetic vision of God while finding new ways of working.

Leonard Sweet, in his book *soulTsunami* (pp. 217-235, Zondervan, 1999), delineates four major features of postmodern people we must face in shaping ministry patterns for them. They can be remembered by the mnemonic "EPIC," which stands for experiential, participatory, image-oriented (interactive), and communal. Let's unpack these one by one.

a. First, postmoderns tend to learn by experiential means. While the modern person said: "I'll believe it when I understand it," the postmodern says: "I'll believe it when I experience it." The apostle Thomas was an experiential learner: **"But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.' After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.' Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed'"** (John 20:24-29).

This is why the most effective method of evangelism for postmoderns is incarnational. We must live the reality of Jesus Christ in their presence so they can experience him through us. This does not remove the responsibility to tell them the good news but it explains why, in this information age, we have the same percentage of Christians in America as before the information age.

How do we do this? First, we've got to be connected with the people in our neighborhoods, families, work sites, and communities. The worst thing we could do would be to

hide in our churches and small groups. Secondly, we must incorporate seekers into our relationships. One very large, separationist Bible church in our area has erected a huge set of sports leagues for people of our town. They built the best set of soccer fields in our town, and the line of cars to get in on registration day is very long because the leagues fill up on the first day. How about involving people who are still on the way to meet Christ in acts of charity you may be doing? And does the drummer in the youth band have to be born again? Frankly, at that young age we do not know who the real believers are. I do not suggest that we put people where they don't belong, but surely we can find ways to help them experience Christ in us.

Thirdly, culturally-appropriate worship is essential to experiential learning of Christ. This is an entire subject of its own, but people have different heart-languages of worship, and we must do what we can to accommodate them. For many postmoderns the sound of an organ is the sound of total spiritual disconnect, as is the sound of drums or electric guitar for many others. One way to get around this is to do some worship music in every small grouping so that targeted styles can be used. And because they are in the decision years we must be sure to invest the youth with their own opportunity to do worship in their own heart language.

Fourthly, I have found the use of stories and video clips to be very powerful tools in helping postmoderns receive the teaching of God's word. I write my own stories and I also collect them from all forms of art and literature. This is very different from the use of sermon illustrations simply to illuminate a bullet point. The purpose is to pull people into a brief but powerful experience of a real thing by the use of a story or video clip. Once that world is lodged in the mind and heart it can be used throughout the message. The story then becomes like an icy ramp sliding people toward an inevitable conclusion where they land with a bang and shout: "I get it!"

b. Secondly, postmoderns are participatory. They want to do things themselves, even if they don't know how to do them yet! Their motto is: "I'll believe it when I do it." The modern says: "Ready, aim, FIRE!" The postmodern says: "Ready, FIRE, aim!" So we must make ways for them to do developmental things in discipleship.

My goodness, we have just landed back in the first century in the primary teaching method of...ummm...I don't know--Jesus! **"Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him. These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: 'Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. As you enter the house, give it your greeting. If the house is worthy, give**

it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet'" (Matthew 10:1-14).

Pick through this passage on your own and you will have an amazing list of experiences Jesus arranged for his disciples. The basic plan is to teach and empower people, send them out to do things for the Lord, and then get back together to discuss what happened.

c. Thirdly, postmoderns are overwhelmingly image-based and interactive. Postmoderns say: "I'll believe it when I see it." They use Internet Messenger over email. They pick video games over TV. They choose a movie over a book every time. This is a megashift! It means that a purely text-based, lecture-oriented church is in grave danger of failure in the postmodern era. Hollywood, marketeers, and politicians have been using compelling images to capture the imagination of every generation since the fifties. We cry out: "Why won't these young people listen to us?" A major reason is that they speak a different language. We have been telling them the truth, and they are waiting for us to show them the truth.

Did you ever wonder how the Jewish people of our time can avoid believing in Jesus? They have the truth in what we call the Old Testament and they call the Torah. We've told them that Jesus is the Messiah. What will it take to bring them to faith? Only his return. They will have to see him for themselves, and when they do they will understand and weep for not having received him the first time: **"I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves"** (Zechariah 12:10-14).

If you need to stop and weep for the people of Israel at this moment, please feel free to do so. But understand that because modern Jewish people as a group have a truth dysfunction they will need to see Jesus for themselves before they believe. Postmoderns have the same truth dysfunction for a different reason but the solution is the same.

d. Fourthly, postmoderns are communal. They say: "I'll believe it when my tribe believes it." Donald McGavran, call your office! Halfway through the last century that giant of missionary strategy discerned that people tend to get saved in waves along with people they consider their people, their tribe, their family web, or other connection. So why not try to start waves on purpose?

The Book of Acts describes a small people movement like this: **"But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of**

the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!' And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household" (Acts 16:25-34). The jailor not only got to experience God through the earthquake, but he had a clear, logical presentation of the gospel from Mr. Paul Apostle. And boom--the whole family network believed, probably including servants and employees since a household at that time was the primary scene of industry.

Postmoderns are tribal with other postmoderns. We have a group of young adults in our church who came to age during the time when we had a targeted worship service for postmoderns called neXtworship. When it was time to graduate them into the adult education ministries of our church they said: "Hey, there's nothing for us!" Actually, our church has about fifty meetings a month for worship, ministry, and discipleship, most of which are already interactive. I could not understand the issue at first, but then I remembered Leonard Sweet. It was not that the methods used in those groups were wrong for them, it was simply that they looked at every group and thought: "That's not our tribe" because they were the first group of postmoderns who did not simply quit the church. An easy solution is to let them have their own groups. It will be messy, but don't worry. Scratch cooking is always messier.

CONCLUSION

Postmodern people have a serious truth dysfunction but it is not insurmountable. Some churches have chosen to go native and embrace ambiguity in everything in order to gather in postmoderns. The leader of the Emergent church movement, Brian McLaren, has stated that he doesn't know what the gospel is, or orthodoxy, for that matter. On the other side there are good, Bible-believing churches which refuse to sing any contemporary songs. Both groups are looking primarily at other people rather than God on those subjects. God has indeed revealed the gospel to us, and he is still the One who gives us songs in the night!

Our God is a God of new things, new wineskins, and old truths which never change. He calls for scratch cookin' in ministry in every generation. Now it's our turn, and we can choose to go native, reject our young people (again), or we can follow God wisely into new patterns of ministry by which we overcome the truth dysfunctions of our time. The shocking thing is that the basic principles underlying these "new" patterns have been in the Bible all along!