Reaching the culture rather than being changed by it.

In this section, I want to consider some of the challenges that face us as Christians in reaching the culture of the world in which we live. In this consideration, I will reflect on Postmodernism, Deconstruction and Consumerism. Each of these notions brings its own challenge to what we are as a church and our mission to the world.

Postmodernism

The first challenge to mission is that postmodernism rejects the notion of a meta-narrative, specifically, the 'meta-narrative of modernism'[1]. James K.A. Smith says 'Postmodernism can be understood as the erosion of confidence in the rational as sole guarantor and deliverer of truth, coupled with a deep suspicion of science – particularly modern science's pretentious claims to an ultimate theory of everything'.[2] Quoting Lyotard, he goes on to say that postmodernism is 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'.[3]

Thus, if our presentation of the gospel includes the notion of ultimate truth and a big story that accounts for everything, we are likely to come up against the same suspicion that is being expressed towards rationalism. As David Smith says, 'in the resulting atmosphere of disillusion and cynicism, *all* claims to possess absolute truth have become suspect since they are perceived to involve a dangerous arrogance and, all too often, to result in terrible violence.'[4] James K. A. Smith suggests that Lyotard's issue was not with meta-narrative itself but with meta-narratives which 'also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the story's claim by an appeal to universal reason'.[5] Meta-narratives require faith to be believed even the meta-narrative of science such as *On the Origin of the Species.*

This means that the notion of one truth that explains all and can be rationally proved is no longer tenable and any such claim is 'authoritarian or oppressive'[6]. The implication is that each person is free to decide for themselves 'what is truth' (John 18:38). To quote the title of a Manic Street Preachers album: 'This is my truth tell me yours'.[7]

Different people have proposed different solutions to this challenge. Richard Baukham suggests that, since we cannot know in full the inscrutable plans of God, we cannot claim to know all truth, but we can bear witness to our understanding of the truth and thus reason with people from a humble perspective that doesn't claim exclusivity with regard to knowledge.

James A. K. Smith suggests that we should 'live the story for the world', because 'the church is the stage where God's drama is played out'.[8] In this suggestion he says that we should resist the tendency of pragmatic evangelicalism, which tries to "dumb down" the story to make it accessible or

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[1] Butler, *Postmodernism,* p.62

[2] James A. K. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p.62

[3] Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (French original, 1979; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv, quoted in Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, p.63

[4] David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2003), p.63 (emphasis in the original)

[5] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* p.65

[6] Baukham, *Bible and Mission,* p.88

[7] Manic Street Preachers, *This is My Truth Tell Me Yours* (Sony Music Entertainment, 1998)

[8] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* p.79

attractive to the culture'.[9] He proposes a reaffirmation of the traditional elements of the faith such as the Eucharist saying, people '... are looking for elements of transcendence and challenge that MTV could never give them...they are searching for the mysterious practices of the ancient gospel'.[10]

John D. Caputo proposes that we should emphasise the notion of the spiritual journey of faith that we are all on. 'In the postmodern situation, the very idea of a "spiritual journey" seems to suggest that there is more than one, that each of us must find a way, which presumes that that we are all a bit lost.'[11] Thus, if we acknowledge that we are on the impossible journey into the transcendent, full knowledge of which is impossible, we are affirming that it is a journey of faith which allows us to dialogue in a plural environment from a basis of humility rather than condescension and arrogance.

One of our challenges in communicating the gospel is that postmodernism is deeply suspicious of institutions. John Drane suggests that 'the western church is actually in a weak position, for the very simple reason that to most people it is part of the same institutionalized authority structure that helped create the mess in the first place.'[12] If people are suspicious of the church because it is an institution associated with the past it will certainly be suspicious of the message which the church propagates. We need to be mindful of this when we invite people in.

It seems to me that the various solutions proposed above primarily focus on 'how we do church' rather than how we impact the community with the good news of the kingdom. Even the Fresh Expressions movement is focussed more on the internal rather than the external, emphasising new ways of being the church in order to reach the world, rather than the mode of proclamation.[13]

I believe one of the answers to the problem posed by postmodernism is to take the focus off the format and structure of church and to focus instead on ton the church as a community of God's people tasked with taking the good news of the kingdom to the world. This will lead is to incarnate the gospel to a far greater extent than 'seeker-friendly services', and build trust in people rather than in the (discredited?) institution. As David Smith says, 'A postmodern generation displaying a growing sense of spiritual hunger, needs to encounter the life-changing Christ in a way that does not require the acceptance of ecclesiastical baggage from the past but allows freedom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to turn contemporary processes of thought and ways of living towards the Saviour'.[14] It is not that format and structures are not important, but that they need to be a vehicle for, and not a hindrance to, the proclamation of the gospel.

Deconstruction

This leads on to deconstructionism. In his book *Daybreak*, Nietzsche announces that 'All things that live long are gradually so saturated with reason that their origin in unreason thereby becomes improbable. Does not almost every precise history of an origination impress our feelings as paradoxical and wantonly offensive? Does the good historian not, at bottom, constantly contradict?".[15]

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9 Ibid., P.77

10 Ibid., p.78

11 John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p.42

12 Drane, *Faith in a Changing Culture,* p.14

13 The Mission-shaped Church working group, *Mission-shaped Church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp.1-149

14 Smith, *Mission After Christendom*, p.130

15 Friedrich Nietzsche; Clark, Maudemarie; Leiter, Brian; Hollingdale, R.J. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997). pp. 8–9

This is the basis on which Derrida formulated his ideas of deconstructionism. Essentially, deconstructionism sets out to question the reality and validity of everything we perceive, including language, thought, and knowledge. This includes inherited societal structures.

When it comes to the church, those who advocate deconstructionism suggest that all inherited ecclesiology should be questioned, whether that be New Testament forms, or those inherited from church history. Thus, leadership structures and even the principle of gathering have been under attack as those who advocate deconstructionism seek to find new forms of church which are culturally relevant in a postmodern setting.

One of the tenets of postmodernism is that, for something to be real, it must be real for me. To quote the title of the book by J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *'Truth is stranger than it used to be'*.[16] Truth is only truth as it is perceived by the individual and my truth may not be your truth. This undermines the whole basis of doctrinal belief and enables any participant within a culture or sub-culture to create a form of reality that works for them.

When applied to the church, we find that everything is up for debate and all ways of being church are questioned. No longer is the church the custodian of the truth or of faith. Instead, the faith journey is whatever I want it to be. That may mean that I can connect with the church (or a specific church) or it may mean that my faith journey is more real if I embark on it on my own. Any theory or theology of church that contradicts this is therefore suspect as it prevents me from actualising my own faith.

The result of this is that church becomes whatever I want it to be. It may be a coffee with another believer; it may be a meditation on a book or Bible passage with a friend; it may simply be sitting at home and watching someone else's service. Whatever works for me is all that is important.

Obviously, this approach to faith stands in contradiction with both the theology of the church and the history of the church as a gathering of God's people for purpose, whether in small groups, or in larger groups. However, are there some benefits to this approach?

Certainly, if the reformers had not taken a more flexible approach in seeking to re-establish Biblical models of church, we would still be languishing under episcopal structures. But how far should we / can we go when seeking to establish a form of church within a particular cultural and psychological context. Is the New Testament model just one model from which we can draw or should it be the norm for our gathering? In a post-pandemic world, is a hybrid model that allows people to engage at the level they wish to a more appropriate form of church? Is a gathered model the only valid form of church or should a more dispersed model be the order of the day?

Of course, cultural considerations need to be taken into account when thinking about structures and operations of a particular church. Certainly, a church should look and feel different in England compared to a similar church in India, for example. However, the basis of our faith and praxis is the Bible (and especially the New Testament). The challenge is in taking the principles of church that we find in the New Testament and applying them in our own context. What we do not have the option of is throwing out such principles in order to align with our culture or with the prevailing philosophy. If the Word of God is the Word of God, it is so for all times and in all contexts and we ignore it at our peril. Thus, the trend towards deconstruction must be tempered by the principles of scripture that we find concerning the church as a community of God's people called together for purpose. The

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[16] J. Richard Middleton & Brian J. Walsh *Truth is Stranger than it used to be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grover: IVP, 1995)

tendency towards self-actualisation at the expense of community is totally contrary to the purposes of God for both the individual and the church. At base level, authentic church is simply the community of God's people gathered in a specific location for the purpose of making known the good news of the kingdom of God.

Consumerism

In 1987, Barbara Kruger in an iconic artwork coined the phrase, 'I shop therefore I am', based on Rene Descartes famous quotation, 'I think therefore I am'. In other words, self-actualisation is rooted in the individual's ability to make consumer choices. These become an expression of the individual that constitutes part of their identity. Thus, who I am is no longer a function of the community in which I live (as it was for thousands of years), but rather it is a function of my ability to fulfil my perceived wants and needs.

This consumerism is a characteristic of developed cultures (particularly, but not exclusively, in the West). Those in the developing nations operate on the lowest rung of Maslow's triangle (fulfilling physiological and safety needs). However, this consumerism has leaked into every aspect of life in developed nations as people are no longer concerned with subsistence but rather with satisfaction and personal fulfilment. This creates a society which is self-centred and operates on a level where transactions (physical, emotional and spiritual) are only of value if they affirm who I am. If something gives me pleasure, it is good; if something gives me pain, it is bad. This is regardless of any other implications of such transactions, moral or otherwise.

In his book *The Divine Commodity*, Skye Jethani identifies that the church has been strongly influenced by the consumerism of the world.[17] He asks the question, 'Has the contemporary church been so captivated by the images and methods of the consumer culture that it has forfeited its sacred vocation to be a countercultural agent of God's kingdom in the world? And if it has, what are we to do about it?'[18] In the remainder of the book, he seeks to analyse this suggestion and proposes how we can recapture the divine intention.

Since the Reformation, the church has so emphasised individual salvation that the notion of corporate purpose has been reduced to helping people to get to heaven. Rather than individuals seeing themselves as agents of the kingdom with a corporate responsibility for the *kosmos*, salvation has been framed around giving people a 'bus ticket' to escape this world. Once they have their ticket, they then have the option of connecting with the people of God or otherwise. Such consumer Christianity has led to a church where individuals can not only choose whether they attend church or not, but also, which church they will connect with based on style, age, socio-economic fit, etc. When illustrating this concerning a particular couple who left his church for a bigger one, Skye Jethani suggested that 'Choice trumped commitment. Comfort trumped community'.[19]

The pandemic has accelerated this tendency in that people who were previously committed to church suddenly realised that they had a choice. They could still consume a spiritual experience from home without the discomfort of relationships. They could view the offering of whichever church they liked without even having to get dressed in the morning. For many, these benefits far outweigh the paybacks of regathering.

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[17] Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering A Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009)
[18] Ibid. p.11
[19] Ibid., p.127

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The real problem of this consumerism is that it is rooted in a distorted view of the purpose of the church and the purpose of salvation. As we have laid out above, the church is not in existence to satisfy the perceived needs of individuals, but to partner with God in bringing the kingdom of God to earth in all its forms. Whilst individuals can play a small part in that purpose, it cannot be fully realised except in community, and it can only be seen at a local level as communities of God's people live and work in harmony with each other to change the world in which they live. Such consumerism completely lacks the missional and vocational dimensions of the church.

A cursory consideration of the New Testament will highlight the corporate nature of salvation. Each of the metaphors of the church (the bride, the body of Christ, the temple, the army, etc.) are meaningless without the relational aspect of salvation. Any person who is serious about pursuing their faith and who considers these metaphors cannot but see that our existence as Christians in this world is dependent on our being together. My destiny cannot be realised unless I am working it out in relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Conclusion

We live in a culture that is nearly two generations removed from the one that went to church and believed in Christian values. Unfortunately, the church has retained many of the vestiges of Christendom. Many still have the notion that all we have to do is be there, and speak the truth and people will come in. Then we can get them to heaven. Others attempt to draw people in by having the best worship, the most entertaining preaching, lights, smoke machines, and generally a form of entertainment that attempts to mimic the world around us.

However, what our culture craves is not entertainment – people can access that with over 100 tv channels on Netflix and Prime. It does not crave empirical truth – belief that such exists has been dealt a death blow by Derrida. It does not crave morality – surely everyone is free to decide what is right in their own eyes? It does not want judgement – I read in a book recently a statement by a commentator which said 'all evangelical Christians hate gay people' – this is how the world perceives us. I believe the world craves the following:

Acceptance – accepting people as they are. Jesus accepted everyone as they were and got into trouble for it with the religious authorities. That was their beginning on the path to discipleship.

Relationship – there is a dire lack of dependable, real relationships out there. People want people they can trust. Often, they need to trust us before they can trust Jesus.

Authenticity – people who practice what they preach and are humble enough to own up to it when they don't.

Integrity – our world is rife with hypocrisy, especially the political world. People want to encounter honesty and consistency in their dealings.

Community – it is community that gives people identity and it is a crisis of identity that has produced the problems in the culture in which we live.

Spirituality – people do not want religion but a route towards transcendence. It is not necessarily a way of living that people want but an affirmation that the inner sense that something beyond themselves exists is real.

All of this comes down to imitating Christ. If we are to impact our culture, we need to stop focussing on the window dressing and get back to genuinely being the hands, feet and mouth of Jesus in the world.