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Why bother with context?

One of the seminal understandings of recent times has been that everything comes to us through language and culture. The truth is that we meet God, just as we meet our neighbour, at this point. We encounter reality in our culturally and linguistically determined context. This insight also includes a vital missiological principle. It is what Leslie Newbigin calls 'the logic of election'. God does not come down to me as it were 'through the skylight' but via my neighbour. But my neighbour, if he or she is going to communicate with me, must do so by means of a shared language and culture. So the bearer of God's word must enter the culture and learn the language of those among whom he or she is living and then communicate the message within that context. This is the process we call contextualisation.

Today's context - life in fragments

Almost every commentator you read today suggests that we stand at a moment of decisive cultural change. The key indicator, as we all now know, is that trendy little prefix 'post'. So this essay mentions a postmodern society. The information age is labelled post-industrialism, George Linbeck is a 'post liberal' and more than a dozen years ago now Dave Tomlinson wrote his controversial book called the 'The Post Evangelical'. So what is going on?

To me, the basic idea in postmodernism is that of fragmentation - what Francis Lyotard famously called 'a suspicion of meta-narratives'. There are no big, all embracing, stories, or if there are they are false. Also, history does not matter very much. At best it can be plundered for its antiquarian interest - 'theme parks!' - but we do not need to study it seriously, nor do we expect it to shape the present. Neither is the future important. We have no certain knowledge of it and those who say that they have a clear *goal* in life are deluding themselves. Living in the present is the name of the game, indeed living on the surface. After all, if there is no significant past or future, do we have anything else but 'surfaces'. Also, if there is no one banner under which we can all stand, no cause we can all join, no story which is the story of us all, then we can and, indeed, must invent our own. (Does this mean, for example, that our churches today are 'invented communities' marketing our wares like a supermarket?) This is a dangerous move towards relativism and non-realism. If nobody has got the truth, why should we trust anybody - why is one story better than another? And the people who say that there are no big stories, why should we trust them?

All this sounds such bad news that we might wonder what all the fuss is about or why, at any rate, Christians need to pay much attention. However, for many people in today's world the point is just the opposite. The postmodern society sounds like good news, like the great escape. Why is this? It is because modernity has failed. Here are some of the ways:

1. We are much less sure about the promise apparently held out by man's unaided rationality.
2. Evolutionary 'progress' seems to have been derailed. Two world wars, Auschwitz, the atomic bomb, Vietnam, leaves us feeling very differently from our ancestors a century ago.

3. In particular, technology and science has not delivered. What we now observe is not a technological utopia, but a man-made ruin.
4. The big political stories, Marxism and free market Capitalism have few adherents. Marxist ideologies seem little more than a 'long march to prison'. Capitalist societies seem inherently and increasingly unjust.
5. Institutional religion appears to be failing, at least in the postmodern West.

These are all meta-narratives that have, to some extent, been discredited. Modern philosophers like Derrida and Foucault go further. Inherently the attempt to create meta-narratives was little more, they say, than a complicated plot by those who had the stories to marginalise and then overpower those who did not. If the stories are essentially Western, white, male, rationalistic, technological stories, then those who are non-Western, or black, or women, or 'religious', or 'primitive' (i.e. technologically illiterate), are being told a story in which they can play no essential part. But these groups are waking up to the fact that they have their stories too and if this means the breakdown of meta-narrative then, as far as they are concerned, so much the better.

How then do we live out the gospel?

1. We must not cling to, or go back to, modernity

You may say to me: we have never wanted to be 'modern' in this sense. We have always realised that the goals of modernity were false. Let me list just some of the ways that modernity has got into the church:

- ❖ We have a rational confidence in 'the word'; texts, sermons, definitions, statements of faith, explanations, discussion, rational control, are what we are about. Notice our distrust of areas of spirituality - dreams, prophecies, ecstasy, visions, dance etc which are not rationally determined. Do we get this from the Bible? We do not. We get it from modernity.
- ❖ At another level we have great confidence in the 'great god technology'. A little technology may help, but much of it isolates, alienates and exploits.
- ❖ We have subscribed to the political meta-narratives as long as they have suited us. When Western imperialism suited us, we supported it. The same is true today of exploitive capitalism. We have supported systems which have exploited the poor, taken the bread from the mouths of children, exported death.
- ❖ We too have been sucked into a confidence in inevitable, thoughtless progress, a vague utopian developmentalism. You can tell this because we have lost effective belief in the Biblical meta-narrative. How many of you have preached on heaven and hell, or the Second Coming, recently?
- ❖ Our religion is still very institutional: we define people's spirituality by their piety. 'Going to church' is still the required signal for effective discipleship.
- ❖ Above all, we have used the meta-narrative of the gospel, which was meant to liberate people, to tell a 'story' of our own which has excluded others who are not like us.

2. We must affirm the meta-narrative of the gospel

In brief this means that we have a history (against postmodern amnesia); we have a future (against postmodern despair); we are a covenant people (against individualism and greed). (I hope all this reminds us of the Lord's Table!)

3. We must present the gospel cross-culturally (practice critical contextualisation)

- ❖ Remember that the Bible is also a document which is rooted in a specific culture and language(s). Therefore, there is no substitute for Bible study, just as there is no substitute for language learning and culture learning in missionary work. In Bible lands, so to speak, we must be cross-cultural travellers or settlers and not tourists. Bible translation work remains an essential ingredient of contextualisation.
- ❖ Being marooned in a Christian sub-culture is fatal to our communication with those outside the faith. Further, we must beware the confusion which comes from equating 'the world' in the pejorative sense, with culture. All cultures have a 'worldly' element (including the Christian sub culture!) but, of course, that is not the whole story.
- ❖ There is a practical methodology here which enables us to practice critical contextualisation and I can illustrate this by means of a concrete example. Imagine you are a youth group leader who has a fairly well committed group, but one that is suspicious of formal church involvement.
 - a) Study the local culture phenomenologically and uncritically. E.g. What sort of music do your young people listen to? How do they spend their evenings? What would be their preferred means of gathering together?
 - b) Study Scripture together to provide a framework for decision making. E.g. How does Scripture view the creative arts? What does the Scripture mean by such terms as 'worldliness' and 'separation'? What value does the Scripture put on corporate acts of worship?
 - c) Get the group to evaluate their own practices and make decisions about them. Do not make the decisions for them. Remember they know their own culture better than you do.

4. We must remember that contextualising the gospel in a postmodern world demands a different style

- ❖ People have significant 'little stories' that we need to listen to. They will often provide us with significant clues. Our practice must be more of the therapist and less of the preacher. Similarly, the Bible is full of little stories, like Judges or the parables of Jesus.
- ❖ We need to interpret, rather than legislate.
- ❖ Don't institutionalise - that's too big a story. Not the Church, or the denomination, perhaps not even the local church meeting together in one building. The appropriate group might be a house-group or a coffee evening. The appropriate place might be a pub or a community centre or a rugby club.
- ❖ Conversations are better than services.
- ❖ Not doctrine, but stories - a mystery to be contemplated, not a problem to be solved. Also accept the fragmentary. Agree that there may be loose ends.

❖ Right brain is as important as left brain.

Conclusion

This is a day of great opportunity. Modernity was, and is, essentially a control mechanism. However, people are beginning to break away. Let us give up our ambition to be in control and offer them our own fragmented lives so that we can join them. Together we can journey toward the truth, with Jesus as our guide.

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