

Title: Post-Modernism goes to Church

Text:

Theme:

Series: part 1

Introduction – the principle of pragmatism

Peter Berger is a Christian social scientist and a well-known analyst of modernity. I am more of an observer of culture and particularly, cultural Christianity, Peter is a student of it. He wisely said, that whoever dines with the devil, needs to bring a long spoon. The evangelical church has been dining with the devil, and I fear that she broke the handle on the spoon years ago.

Not long ago, a painter in our church was working on a job in a church building. Naturally curious, he looked for information that would let him know what kind of a church it was. The church had no distinguishing name its title, it was a community church. It offered programs for adults, students and kids. It had VBS in the summer, Sunday school on Sunday mornings and several other things that sounded familiar to people exposed to many evangelical churches. Eventually, he was able to find out; the church housed a Mormon congregation. What was a Mormon church doing with all of the programs that we developed? It simply found out what appealed to people, tried to do it well and attract them to its organization. If you take basic marketing principles and apply them, even to the Amish, they will to some degree, work!

Over 30 years, a young man graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary where he was influenced by one particular professor who thought that the evangelical (post-definition) church had lost touch with the culture that it was supposed to reach. This young man, took these ideas, gathered a small group of people who embraced this idea, and set out to re-invent the church. He went through some of the affluent suburbs of Chicago, and interviewed people about church. Did they go? If not, why not? If so, what did they like about it, what did they not like about it? The results were really not that surprising. People don't like dull music, constant appeals for money, long, irrelevant sermons that deal with doctrine and they don't like shoddy presentations. They like churches that have programs for everybody, clean children's facilities with exciting leaders, convenient parking places and auditoriums that didn't look too churchy. They were asked, if there was a church that met your needs, that had music that you were familiar with, that did not beg for money, that spoke about topics that appealed to you and that did things in a first class fashion, would you go? Enough people said, yes. And, the Willow Creek Church in South Barrington, IL was born, with Bill Hybels at the helm. The numerical success of this organization stunned the Christian community and led to thousands of copy cats. The thousands of copies wanted to learn from the best, so a denomination was born called the Willow Creek association. It is the first time in the history of the church, that I am aware of, that an entire organizational structure of the church has been formed, not on the basis of belief, but on the basis of methods. If you embrace the methods, then you are

part of the club. But hold the phone, what happens when the Mormon church embraces the methods?

Now, do you see what has happened? Marketing 101 is rather simple: **1) Find out what your target audience is. 2) Find out what your target audience wants (felt needs) 3) Craft your product so that it appeals to them. 4) Communicate this to your target audience. 5) Rinse and repeat as often as is necessary.** Now, on the surface you would think that the fatal flaws with this thinking would be readily apparent. Instead of being in a position to lead the culture, this process puts the church into following it. Instead of blazing the trail, the church simply echoes the world. Instead of telling people what they need to hear, the church tells people what they want to hear. As tragic to the gospel and ultimately to the church, as all of that is, what I contend is worse, is what has happened underneath the surface. The foundation for what we are to believe and do has shifted from God's objective Word, to man's subjective opinions. Our message and our ministry becomes a sail that is blown by the wind instead of an anchor that holds steady in the storm.

Methods are what are seen. But, methods are anchored to beliefs. Methods are a reflection of what we believe. In that sense then, methods are not neutral. When you purchase a method, when you embrace a method, you are bringing with it the belief to which it is anchored. The belief that drives so many methods in the church is pragmatism. **Pragmatism is the idea that if it works, it must be okay.** Pragmatism is killing the evangelical church and the poisoning is self-inflicted.

The history of the church is marked by faithfulness and pot-marked by compromise. Tragically, there seems to be more compromise than faithfulness, which by contrast makes the times of faithfulness and the people of faith stand out in stark relief to the normal flow of apathy. By the end of the 1st Century, the Lord Jesus, through the apostle John wrote to his church seven letters, recorded at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Most of the local churches were admonished and warned about their failure to seriously guard the faith. For most of her history, times of persecution have led to purity of life, but some doctrinal extremes. Times of peace and prosperity have led to open theological discussion, but eventual tolerance and compromise.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says that if you want to know what water is, don't ask a fish. It is so difficult to attempt to comment on one's own context since we are in it and experientially do not know anything else. One of the reasons why the study of history is so important is that our frame of reference becomes larger than ourselves. The contemporary church in the west lives within a contemporary culture that ignores (at best) and often disdains history. Pushing the edge of the envelope, being ahead of the curve, leading out front, are intended to give us the impression that newer must be better, younger is cool, older is irrelevant. The western church has been drinking the same purple cool-aid¹. We have embraced, adopted and accepted the world's standards of

¹ Cult leader, Jim Jones (fall of 1978) led a group of people from the San Francisco region to start a new society in Central America, where he was the undisputed leader. When authorities began to move in on

success. We have craved acceptance and respect in our desire to be noticed and be given a seat at the table. By adopting the world's views, we have accepted the wrong foundation for truth. As I will seek to demonstrate, the world at large does not have one accepted foundation for truth. Today, many leading philosophers are locked in a battle over whether or not truth actually exists, and if it does, can it actually be known. Naturally, since the church has so undiscerningly accepted the world's views of so many things, she is being seriously influenced by these ideas, which like the world's views before, threaten to undermine the gospel.

Since the evangelical church as been drinking the cool-aid of pragmatism, then she is drunk with idea of constantly finding out what this generation thinks.

My concern in this series is not so much with the history of philosophy, but with the doctrinal and personal purity of the church. However, what is happening in society at large is to a great extent affecting the greater culture of Christianity. This influences all of us. Truthfully, this threatens the gospel. In this series, I am going to be pointing out serious problems some of which are endemic to churches in our area. By doing so, I am opening up myself to accusations of jealousy, or mean-spiritedness. That is not my heart, and I trust that a fair hearing will make that obvious.

1. The tip of the iceberg

The principle of pragmatism demands that we know “what works today.” So, **what is working today? (answer – Post-modernism)** Today, we live within the prevailing philosophical climate called, post-modernism. Post-modernism is contemporary. Therefore, if the church is going to be contemporary, it must be post-modern. Today, the new trend for churches is called the Emerging Church Movement. The Emerging or Emergent Church is the result of people who still claim a version of Christianity but in a post-modern context. Some churches (any many do not want to be known even as a church), are started on this view. Others, that are already established are being heavily influenced by it, because “it is what is hip, new, trendy, cool and of course – what is working. The Emerging church movement is the result of post-modernism going to church. But, **what is post-modernism?** Post-modernism is what has come after modernism. Now, here is a huge caution. This is where terms can become really confusing. So, I will seek to define them as carefully as possible. When we use the word, “modern” we can use that in a general sense to refer to something that is, well, actually, modern – say, right now – 2008. But, when we use the word “modern” to refer to an era, or a philosophy, the modern era actually dates back to 1550 and is believed to have ended in 1945, for reasons I will explain.

To understand post-modernism, we need to understand modernism. To understand modernism, we need to understand the middle ages, and the ancients before that. So, in an act of defiance of post-modernity, that says that history is blasé and passé, here is some history.

him, he was able to force or convince the people to drink a purple drink that contained a poison that resulted in the death of most of the people including himself.

Discussions about philosophy and ideas go back to the glory days of the Greek culture to Plato and Aristotle.

The Ancients

Plato (427-347 BC) taught that there are universal truths, that he called absolute forms to which humans ought to conform their lives. His prodigy, **Aristotle, (384-322 BC)** taught that we could know these ideal truths by inductive reasoning (start small, then make a general conclusion); where as, Plato taught deductive reasoning (start general and apply to a specific). Both men believed and taught that **truth is absolute**, and that there are therefore, absolute standards by which people ought to live. The sum total of a life that was lived according to these truths was virtue. Virtue was comprised of prudence, temperance, courage and justice. But, Plato and Aristotle were not able to clearly explain where these concepts came from. They just knew that they existed, and that they were universal norms for all humans. To **Plato and Aristotle, the basis for these ethical norms was human reasoning.**

What Plato and Aristotle observed by God's common grace was mistakenly tied to man's ability to rationally reason. Virtue was anchored to man's reasoning. However...

The NT Ethic

New Testament Christianity taught that there are universal laws based on God Himself. In contrast to the foundation being human reasoning, NT Christianity believes that there are unchanging ethics that were taught by Christ, who Himself is the ultimate model and example of life and truth. Christ taught and modeled humility. Christ taught and lived truth. Christ taught, lived and died love. Christ modeled holiness and purity. The teaching of Christ is the ground for ethics because God is the ultimate basis and source of objective truth.

The Middle Ages (400 – 1550 AD)

During the middle ages, a form of Christianity was the dominant worldview in Europe. Theologians and philosophers believed in universal, objective truth and thought that this was grounded in both biblical revelation and in human reasoning. The middle ages to some degree attempted to merge Plato, Aristotle and Jesus.

For example, **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)** attempted to merge Augustinian theology with Aristotle philosophy. Aquinas thought that human logic was rational enough that you could reason with a person to believe in God. Aquinas came up with universal proofs for the existence of God because he believed that while humanity was sinful, it was not so fallen that it could not be reasoned with.

1 - FIRST MOVER: Some things are in motion, anything moved is moved by another, and there can't be an infinite series of movers. So there must be a first mover (a mover that isn't itself moved by another). This is God.

2 - FIRST CAUSE: Some things are caused, anything caused is caused by another, and there can't be an infinite series of causes. So there must be a first cause (a cause that isn't itself caused by another). This is God.

3 - NECESSARY BEING: Every contingent being at some time fails to exist. So if everything were contingent, then at some time there would have been nothing -- and so there would be nothing now -- which is clearly false. So not everything is contingent. So there is a necessary being. This is God.

4 - GREATEST BEING: Some things are greater than others. Whatever is great to any degree gets its greatness from that which is the greatest. So there is a greatest being, which is the source of all greatness. This is God.

5 - INTELLIGENT DESIGNER: Many things in the world that lack intelligence act for an end. Whatever acts for an end must be directed by an intelligent being. So the world must have an intelligent designer. This is God.

The Modern Era (1550 – 1945)

At this point in history, we came into what is called there was a huge split that occurred. The Modern Era began with the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The Reformation was the Protestant movement that reacted against the church of Rome's view of salvation and along with that, it reacted against the confidence that Roman Catholicism had placed on human reasoning. The Reformers emphasized human sinfulness and the utter need for Divine Revelation, if humans were to know anything with certainty. Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) was part of the mantra. The Bible, not man, not popes, was the objective basis of truth. The Enlightenment, saw things quite differently. Both the Reformation and the Enlightenment had some things that were the same (emphasis upon learning, study, reading, education, printing, and travel) but the basis of their beliefs were radically different. The Reformers saw the world as being under the authority of God. He was the Creator and the final law maker and giver. The Enlightenment saw man as the final measure of all things. The Reformers emphasized human depravity. The Enlightenment emphasized human potential.

The way this played out in philosophy was seen in **Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650)** whose teaching on *rationalism* emphasized the adequacy of the human to be able to reason his way into knowing objective, rational truths. Since mankind could reason these things on his own, he did not need the Bible.

Thomas Hobbes, (1588-1679) essentially taught the same thing. **Man's potential had no limits.** Hobbes took his cue from Aquinas who thought that mankind possessed by himself the ability to reason. Therefore, mankind did need the Bible to tell us how to

live. This led to a growing confidence in science (the ability to observe and reason) to be able to give us truths without having to depend on the Bible (or the oppressive church).

Rationalism had a sister called *Empiricism*. Empiricism is the belief that we can only know what we touch, taste, smell, see and hear. All knowledge comes to us by the way of our 5 senses.

The big thing that you need to see in all of this, is that there is a growing consensus that man is the measure of all things. Truth comes from within man.

David Hume (1711-1776) built on empiricism but taught that we were **trapped behind our sense experiences**. In fact, just because we seemed to have experienced something, doesn't mean that we really experienced it all. (Matrix – movie) What you experience is simply a projection of your mind. Hume was a skeptic.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) attempted to defend rationalism against Hume's version of empiricism. But, Kant attempted to do by accepting Hume's premise that all knowledge comes by means of our five senses.

Kant taught that there is a Real World (Reality) that he called the noumenal world. The noumenal world is the world of objective reality. However, we live in the phenomenal world. We live in the world where things appear to us. What they appear to be is not necessarily what they really are. There is always something that stands between us and the real world. The wall that divides the phenomenal world from the noumenal world is the way our senses experience (and thus interpret) the world.

It was Kant's teaching that really pushed a split into the learning and educational model. Science gives us knowledge and facts (phenomena world) but religion gives us values, personal opinions and tastes. God may be real, but he cannot be empirically known. Science gives us truth, Religion gives us values, or lofty morals that make us feel good, but are really not that useful.

Kant's view that we are "stuck" behind the wall by our experiences and cannot get out into the real world eventually was developed into the idea that we are trapped inside our own language and we cannot know reality. This has become the huge shift between modernism and post-modernism. Modernism taught that we were separated from reality by our sense experiences (which were limited by nature). Post-modernism is the idea that we are separated from reality by our language. We are trapped within our own language cultures. (more on that in a second)

Modernism for the most part was characterized by man's incredible confidence in himself to accomplish anything, including world peace, prosperity, health and all sorts of societal advancements. Modernism brought us evolution, we did not need God, we had ourselves, and we could accomplish anything that we wanted to. But, the reason that modernism did not carry the day, was because our scientific advancements brought us 2 world wars, extermination camps, concentration camps, and nuclear bombs. Genocide,

and Russian gulags were horrific examples of what we could become. That is why 1945 is basically the date when the world began to realize that man does not have such great potential. Mankind can be a monster. Modernism was characterized by potential, post-modernism is characterized by skepticism.

Philosophically, Post-modernism is the belief that we create our own realities within our own languages. There is a real world that exists, but we cannot get outside of our languages to know it. Therefore, there are no universal truths that we may objectively know. Truth is a relative concept and is temporarily constructed and defined within each group, but there is no absolute definition of truth. There is no essence or nature to language. There are only many languages. Meaning is not a matter of what a person meant by a statement, but is just a matter of how those words are used within a social setting or community and how they are viewed by those people at that time, in that place, but are open to being viewed differently by other people in another place at another time.