



**WHAT DOES A POSTMODERN CULTURE MEAN  
FOR A CHURCH THAT IS BOTH FAITHFUL TO  
THE GOSPEL, AND RELEVANT TO CULTURE.**

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## Introduction

As each age changes there is usually a major shift in the way that people think, which in turn affects their actions and reactions. This change in mindset normally is a gradual process that transpires whilst the changes are materializing. What affects these mind-set changes have on the church can be either positive or negative depending on the individual church. Many of the mindset attitudes have no particular reason for being other than it differs from those who have gone before, and that may be a good enough reason.

In what way these changed conditions affect the way people view Christianity and the church is anyone's guess; only time will tell. What does a new look church in a postmodern culture? How will the church reach a culture that views God as one of many, and sees the church in the same light of spiritual innovation? What is a Therapeutic Culture and how does it affect the way the Gospel is preached? Should the church reduce the Gospel to a therapeutic message or should the church preach a return too classical Christianity?

Will the real church stand up and resist the temptation to compromise, leaving itself with an unchanging message that is capable of changing people's lives. Is Christianity capable of withstanding the cultural and spiritual challenges that will be thrust upon it because of its uncompromising message of the love of Christ? It has done so in the past; can a spiritually obese people stand as their forefathers?

### A Shift in Mind-Set

The very idea of what constitutes a church or church service differs within every opinion within the Western world. Unfortunately, religion and the church have unwittingly delivered some bad press about itself to its post-Christian counterparts, leaving many of them with a rather negative view, valid or not. Whenever the word Christian is used, those in the political correctness movement prickle. Anytime a Christian disagrees on a public issue they are immediately spouted as homophobic, racist, bigoted, small-mind or outdated. One could accuse the political correctness movement of deliberately attacking Christianity. Christianity seems to have lost its influence and respect within the community. It seems to have been excommunicated from the culture at large, or so some would want society to believe.<sup>1</sup> Secular society has watched as the church has back flipped from one issue to the next without really making a stand on what they believe. No two church denominations seem to be able to agree on the issues of the day. By its own actions it has become redundant outside of its Christian ghetto.<sup>2</sup>

Many secular mindsets are adamant that this age has gone beyond the borders of a

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<sup>1</sup> Veith 1994: 210

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* : 209

Judeo-Christian viewpoint, and has deliberately dived right into a swirling water-pool which lacks absolutes, and offers generous servings of relevancy, often just to prove a point. Relevancy has served up a post-Christian delicacy that leaves the postmodern mind licking its plate clean. Postmodernism is not what it portrays itself to be it has deliberately left its dark side hidden deep within the shadows? There are no warnings or labels stating its hazardous effects on ones health, or rather on ones mindset.

With the change in mindset today's culture has a wider interest in non-Christian religions.<sup>3</sup> The church is confronted by the changing face of the family and sexual freedom as morality is challenged by the osmosis that postmodernity offers. With a rapid decline of two parent families and a rise in teenage pregnancy and abortion, the spread of AIDS, the gay lobby and the widespread confusion regarding pornography and obscenity, the church seemingly has its back against the wall. There was a time when the church easily dealt with such problems, but now they face challenges from both outside and within its walls. Political correctness has two sets of rules, one for itself and one for Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

Civilization has moved from the basic to the exceptional, from typewriters to computers, board games to Nintendo, records and 8-tracks to compact discs. Religions and sects like the mother-earth lovers have integrated together to save the world from itself. Yet, the church seems idle or stagnant having lost its ability to absorb change. As Robert Nash puts it, "the church is like an eight track church in a CD world". For instance, church bulletins look much like they did twenty years ago. A photocopy of announcement on a colored A4 sheet with the logo on the front page. Some churches have moved on to video presentation announcements or have produced a bi-monthly brightly colored printed booklet. Yet, even the so-called contemporary church finds itself stuck in a therapeutic mode. With time limits in services, there is little or no allowance for what Pentecostals call a Holy Spirit move, as song leaders rush through a list of the latest Hillsongs. Many sermons have style but lack content. It is a feeding frenzy of feel-good issues that are sugarcoated and air laden with froth and bubble. These sermons please the mind and starve the spirit, leaving Christians obese and useless. Some preachers try to use stories, leaving the listener remembering the narrative rather than the message. There is nothing wrong with a good meta-narrative, but if there is no Gospel message then it becomes ineffective. Others may have no idea that their sermons are tedious and do not connect to the current mindset.<sup>5</sup> The message has been changed in many conservative churches in an attempt to appeal to the contemporary society. It is possible for the church to be postmodern without being a postmodernist.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nash 1997:37

<sup>4</sup> Gill 1997: 81

<sup>5</sup> Nash 1997: 2

<sup>6</sup> Veith 1994: 210

Many face a decline in congregational giving. Most people now question giving 10% of their wage to the church, unlike those of the modern era.<sup>7</sup> This age is taking many, including the church on an emotional roller coaster ride that threatens to leave them nauseated with disorientation. Some have begun to take matters into their own hands by trying to navigate themselves through the maze of emotional turmoil. As postmoderns become self-navigators, Christians need to become spiritual-navigators. While society becomes more and more fluid and open to spiritual diversity the church needs to prepare to sail the high seas of this fluid culture.<sup>8</sup> It could be a trip of a lifetime, are Christians willing to climb aboard?

### **A New Look Church**

It has already been noted that much of the church is stuck in the '50's, and what is not is stuck in the '60's.<sup>9</sup> In order to grow it should acknowledge the influence of evil. It must see the influence of these powers through political, social and economic structures and be prepared to stand for Biblical truth and morality. The church has an obligation to teach new Christians to live by the standards of the kingdom of God and not by the standards of lobby groups. It should not embrace realism, abortion, racism, pornography, drugs or alcoholism, nor try to twist out of making a stand against these issues. The Christian church is not called to compromise but to counter culture. It should be a growing alternative community.<sup>10</sup> It will be challenged by the present and future, and will require a radical reinvention of how Christians live as disciples' of Christ.<sup>11</sup> The church needs to offer a place of refuge from the long harsh road of daily living as society realizes it is viewed only as a consumer for big business, and not as individuals. Consumers are fast becoming exhausted by the long hours of work and shopping, and in their search for relative truth they will require a place, and friends of a tranquil nature.

Many church buildings have become too large for the immediate congregation, especially mainline denominations. As they begin to shrink, if the church is to continue living in today's era then it must change its attitude to the way it attracts people. For starters, the building could be remodeled to accommodate playgroups, parental groups, issue groups, teenage drop in centers and the like. It is a way of inviting the community to use its buildings and provide an inside view of those who reside within. The church has more to offer than a Sunday service and an offering bag. The postmodern church must be community orientated, not just in mind but in practice. It must be able to feel pain and see the needs of those for which it is meant to serve. Just as Bill Clinton shallowly

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<sup>7</sup> Nash 1997: 37

<sup>8</sup> Sweet 1999: 19

<sup>9</sup> Sweet 1999: 12

<sup>10</sup> Webber 1999: 170

<sup>11</sup> Sine 1999: 277

professed to feel the pain of the American people, so to must the church sincerely feel the pain of its surrounding neighbors.<sup>12</sup>

It is important that a new look church have a North Star, or an anchor. Jesus Christ is the Morning Daystar<sup>13</sup> and the morning star.<sup>14</sup> It is He alone who will keep the church on course, albeit the church must be seeking his will and guidance. Since postmodernity is so fluid it is of the greatest importance that the church has a fixed point in the heavens, and this is done though prayer.<sup>15</sup> It should be Christo-centric not customer-centric. In other words, it is not what the customer wants but what Christ wants.<sup>16</sup> The church that has traveled on dirt roads and cow paths must exit onto superhighways, stopping at the numerous roadhouses to care for the sick, they must become this century's "Good Samaritan".<sup>17</sup>

### **Therapeutic Culture**

The therapeutic culture or the feel good movement was the brainstorm of Freud. Over the years this movement has increasingly gained access to many churches and seminaries. Some college enrollments has risen dramatically as students rush to ride the wave of counseling in their desire to help those with every type of issue imaginable.<sup>18</sup> Postmodernism has created a vast range of new issues that offer counselor's a festive bonanza. Issues like, depression, suicide, drugs, family, abuse, marriage and partnership, sexual problems and addictions, and gambling. Trauma issues like cot death, stillbirth, abortion, and drink-driving are rising dramtically. The list grows longer each year as people trip and stumble though life in their rush to survive. With truth being euthanised, boundaries have faded, and as people stumble closer to the cliff edge, is it any wonder that their lives are constantly traumatized. Questions should be asked, is it right for Christians to become full time counselors? Has a coup ousted the Holy Spirit making him redundant, or should more focus be placed on training people for ministry and allowing the Holy Spirit to do his job?

Over the ages humanity has passed from barbarism to civilization and now it seems to be returning back to its barbaric ways leaving the current civilization extremely fragile. Western confidence has sagged, leaving it prone to lethargy and exhaustion as it preys on its own fears and strangles the life out of itself.<sup>19</sup> Is it any wonder therapeutic practices look so good in their ability to relieve the pent-up stress and anxiety that mankind has created for itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Stott 1999: 202

<sup>13</sup> 2 Peter 1:19

<sup>14</sup> Revelation 22:16

<sup>15</sup> Sweet 1999: 36

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*: 39

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*: 86

<sup>18</sup> Carson 1996: 51

<sup>19</sup> Guinness 1973: 317

### Will the Real Church Stand Up

Christians are told to be in the world but not of it.<sup>20</sup> However, many seem to have identified themselves with it. Their socio-economic differences reflect the economic realities of the world. Their racial differences reflect their racial differences of a wider culture. Their theological differences reflect the political differences of the world. They have forgotten that they are citizens in the higher kingdom of God, which makes them new creatures that cannot be divided by, race, creed or political agendas.<sup>21</sup>

The church and the secular community have separated into sub-cultures that are so diverse they scarcely know the other exists. This may not have been deliberate, in fact it has probably occurred seductively over time. It is hard for this to be denied when church and state have their own separate schools, bookstores, colleges, entertainment, and media.<sup>22</sup> The modern world has rejected the intrusion of the church in public education, politics, and economics, social and industrial policy and increasingly into public morality. Society has deliberately tried to separate the church from every area of public life mainly because they do not want the intrusion of a conscience. The only domain that some in the community feel the church may infringe upon, are those who volunteer involvement in church life.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, in a world that has lost itself, is there any hope for a future without God? Is it time to return to classic Christianity, to rediscover and re-examine truth.<sup>24</sup> What is classic Christianity? Classic Christianity stresses God's transcendence, it sees humanity as a fallen race, and that mankind's problem is his condemnation. It teaches there is no salvation apart from the atoning work of Christ and that our eternal state is either in heaven or in hell.<sup>25</sup> Classic Christianity returns the church back to its origins and foundations that birthed in in the earlier centuries. The culture must be engaged with the truth of God's Word and the power of the Gospel, without this the church become another social activity.

Classic Christianity will attract a new generation of Christians if it speaks effectively to their world. Societies new generations are more interested in broad strokes rather than minute detail. It is attracted by the inclusive not the exclusive, concerned with unity and not diversity. It wants a faith that is dynamic and growing instead of a stagnant faith and is more visual than verbal with a high level of tolerance than ambiguity. Early tradition of the faith dealt with basic issues and was concerned with unity, open and dynamic, mystical, relational,

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<sup>20</sup> John 17

<sup>21</sup> Nash 1999: 42

<sup>22</sup> Veith 1994: 210

<sup>23</sup> Robinson 1994: 187

<sup>24</sup> Guinness 1973: 318

<sup>25</sup> Veith 1994: 214

visual and tangible<sup>26</sup> Still, the church has not yet learned the unity principle. The bickering and bitching that is constantly being touted within a denomination or at other denominations is enough to drive society mad.

Os Guinness in his book the *Dust of Death* writes of the "Third Way" or a higher humanism. He describes it is the realization of a personal and communal relationship to the living God who is infinite and personal. To know him as Creator is significance, to know him in revelation is clarity of knowledge, to know him as personal is fulfillment, to know him in character is order and values, to know him in grace is freedom, love, joy, peace and adoration. Sadly, this is not how the postmodern man knows God. As Guinness puts it, 'the usual taste ranges from bland to bitter'. As the church races towards the contemporary and attempts rediscovery of itself, it has in many ways produced a flashy display of trendy relevance. Reality has become submerged in ritual and rhetoric,<sup>27</sup> making it no different from the ritual and rhetoric of mainline denominations. Baby boomers are realizing they are the aging generation and fear antiquation. In order to refute this they tend to rely on the younger generation and their trends to act as counters against the perils of obsolescence.<sup>28</sup>

There is a secular sociological image of the church that must be removed. This image is of a spiritual ice age where Christians huddle together in there close knit cliques. Yet, there is a spiritual renaissance or awakening happening, but it would be dangerous to call it revival. There is a growing hunger for a spiritual experience that is no longer found in the church, but rather it is found beyond the church. These new spiritual encounters fit the thereupitic theology like a hand to a glove. There is only personal truth that allows people to do whatever makes them feel good. There is a hunger that drives people to seek a non-Christian experience. These experiences are found in the growing age of paganism, Wiccan, Buddhism, new age, earth worshipers, angel worship, crystals, dream catchers and the like. There is a hunger for unrealistic reality that is found in programs like, Charmed, Angel-the vampire with a soul, There is Buffy the vampire slayer, X Files, Sabrina the teenage witch, even the old Bewitched series has returned, but remains tame in comparison to it counterparts.

Where is the church found in all of this spiritual vomit? Where is the Gospel to be found? It has been said that the Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because the recipients are repeatedly changing their place of residence.<sup>29</sup> What does this mean? The Gospel never changes only its presentation, and this is why classical Christianity is so important. During the modern era Christianity has survived the turbulent changes which according to modern intellectuals was not supposed to happen, and even though postmodernism is confronting Christianity in the harshest of ways, it will again

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<sup>26</sup> Webber 1999: 26-27

<sup>27</sup> Guinness 1973: 318

<sup>28</sup> Guinness 1973: 326

<sup>29</sup> Corney 1995:1

survive the epoch.<sup>30</sup> While Christianity survived in modernism, it was denied the supernatural, and through it will survive postmodernism, likewise it is being denied truth.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

One would have to be blind not to see the changes in the mindset of society and individuals. The mind-set changes have been described in part, and some of their effects on individuals and lifestyles have been mentioned. It is obvious that the new mindset is open to spiritual encounters, but these do not necessarily see Christianity as one of them or the church as a vehicle for them.

Christianity, which will enable the church to effectively reach a culture that views God as one of many and sees the church as redundant. The Gospel is life to the hearer and it must be presented in a way that is affective and progressive. The Therapeutic Culture has been birthed from a desire to feel good about oneself. Long gone are the days of harsh hell fire sermons about an angry judgmental God, but the truth of the matter is the love of God needs to be shown.

Will the real church stand up and resist the temptation to compromise leaving itself with an unchanging message that is capable of changing people's lives. Yes, there is a church that has been given the gifts and ability to reach a culture that has lost its way. It will stand for righteousness and offer a spiritual experience to those who are seeking a way out of a future without hope. It will be an uncompromising message of the love of Christ, and it will be willing to pay the price just as Christ did.

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<sup>30</sup> Veith 1994: 209

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*: 218