

What Web Do We Weave?

Postmodern discourse presents an array of expressions that call into question the assumptions, structures and values essential to modern thought. Seeking to communicate the gospel to its modern culture, the evangelical faith uncritically assimilated many of the basic tenants of modern philosophy in order to provide a rational and logical presentation of Christian doctrine. Postmodern philosophy seeks to dismantle and undo the arrogance of modernity. The Postmodern turn frees those of the Christian faith from the constraints of modernity, in particular the modern infatuation with 'the autonomous self.'

Postmodern thought, despite many of its shortcomings, gives us new territory on which to explore faith. The postmodern turn draws attention to the specific and the special, the richness and variety found in everyday life. Postmodernity exposes modernity's disposition to create an artificial homogeneity. Postmodern philosophers, like Michael Foucault, have challenged modernity's claim to universals and timeless categories. Postmodern thinkers attack the modern understanding of the autonomous self by focusing on the social aspect of discourse.¹ This understanding rejects the autonomous self that encounters objects, and interjects a vision of being in the world that recognizes our interconnectedness as a web of relationships. Postmodernity claims that it is in this web of relationships, our situatedness, that truth and even reality is

¹Stanley J. Grenz. *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 127.

constructed. This gives Christianity credibility to proclaim that ‘truth’ was a person, Jesus Christ. Crystal Downing explains that,

The Truth is a person who has related to our position as embodied human beings in order to relate to us. An through this relationship, the Truth will set you free – but not in order to autonomously choose from rival explanations of reality...a freedom made possible only in relationship.²

Modernity’s understanding of individual freedom is undeniably tied to the freedom of consumer choice. This freedom is based on seeking new alternatives that focus only on fulfilling our immediate felt needs. Modernity claims that the greatest good is to follow our dreams, and that it is legitimate to betray our communities in order to realize our dreams. The entire system is build upon the necessity of an autonomous self who is able to re-create itself at a moment’s notice. Postmodern thought has deconstructed the false sense of freedom, the autonomous self, and the selfish consumer that modernity readily assumes and presents Christianity with the possibility of living into relationships and into community that begins to transform our modern eyes into a new vision of life.

Much of my experiences of Christianity have revolved around the consumeristic, dualistic, and hierarchical approach to church and life.³ The postmodern turn has presented me with the possibility a more robust faith that is integrated into all facets of life. The postmodern emphasis on context and social discourse frees Christianity to work toward and long for the reconciliation of the

²Crystal L Downing. *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 207.

³Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 18.

fractious and diverse lives that inhabit communities and seek ways to enliven the church and live out the ministry of Christ.

In order to further explain the vision that I believe the postmodern turn presents, I have attempted to illustrate the integrated life of faith (see diagrams 1.1 and 1.2 on pages 6 and 7).

These illustrations represent how I understand a new approach to spiritual formation, evangelism, and mission. These illustrations are a work in progress. I hope to develop these ideas further as I intentionally live into community and I have no doubt that these illustrations will develop and change over time.

Illustration 1.1 represents the movement of persons from a fragmented lifestyle to becoming a part of an integrated community of faith. The first thing to recognize is that the transformation process is not done as an autonomous individual. This process requires a community of believers who desire to integrate the lives and faith. Surrounding each individual are circles that represent different facets of life: work, community (where they live), collective (faith community), social network, resources, family, and faith. These circles are fairly arbitrary, yet their presence represents the different categories of life. In order to integrate these different facets we must begin to see that relationships between these categories exist and we must intentionally live into enhancing these relationships. Although most churchgoers would deny any gap between their beliefs and their ways of life, most of their everyday concerns receive little attention “in church” and most attitudes and lifestyles are shaped by dominant values of our society.

Faith and community must become our dominant hermeneutical lens (the red and green circles). As Christians, most would likely agree that faith is a hermeneutical lens through which we live and act but not necessarily community. Community is defined as our local proximity or our neighborhoods. As Christians we need to understand mission and spiritual formation as intentionally living into our community. This means trying to find work in their local community, spending social time at local establishments, keeping our purchases local, and using our creative energies within our local communities. It is only through knowing one another that we will be able to authentically address the powers and principalities that rob people of their dignity. As we begin to move from unknown to known and from enemies to friends, we will recognize our interconnectedness and therefore our responsibility to one another and our need for one another.

We are fragmented and fallen individuals in need of wholeness who operate within communities and a world in need of redemption. We must seek to engage the fragmented borders we find around us with our full selves and in doing so expose the glory of shared humanity. We must not lose sight of the diversity in both cultures and individuals, but rather facilitate the means for all of us to be formed relationally and therefore spiritually. Full reconciliation is not possible before the Eschaton, never the less we still need to believe it is the responsibility of Christians to begin to live into the power of the Kingdom available to us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we need seek to live on the border of the now and not yet, working towards redemption, restoration and reconciliation in our local yet global context as we stand in the gap of relationships, hoping that we will meet in the center and recognize our

communal need for each other. Illustration 1.2 illustrates our relational connection on a global scale, desiring to live with an awareness of their connection and relationship to all people, we must be willing to live humbly in our shared humanity.