

CONSTRUCTING A POSTMODERN CHURCH
WITH ANCIENT BUILDING BLOCKS

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*“What’ya readin’, Dad?” Laurel, my 18-year-old daughter asked.
“Postmodern Pilgrims,” I said.
“As long as it has ‘postmodern’ in the title, you’ll read it!” She laughed
and shook her head at me.
“He actually thinks the word means something,” Matt, my 21-year-old
son, eavesdropping from the couch, interjected.*

The word, “postmodernism” means many things to many people, and my son may be right that it might mean nothing really. But today’s culture—the culture that the church is called to reach—is changing. That change, as I discuss below, is radical and fundamental. So much so that Leonard Sweet, in the introduction to *SoulTsunami*, warns the church by writing:

This book is an early warning signal intended to wake us up and keep us awake.

Wake up and smell the future.

Wake up on the right side of history.

Wake up and breathe in the cold, arctic air of a moribund modernity.

Wake up and breathe out the fire of a postmodern future—with all its omens, amens, and amends.

Can the church tell a sleeping world what the best part of waking up is?¹

Sweet suggests that modernity is dying, and that the future culture—which he identifies as “postmodern”—will provide a unique set of

1. Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 16.

circumstances that the Christian church must understand. In the following essay, I will outline some of the changed circumstances and suggest that the church needs to respond courageously and creatively to post-modern culture. One of the characteristics I discuss below is that post-modern culture is often characterized by individual alienation. The church can respond to this alienation by offering an authentic community of meaning.

In order to set a context for the church's role in contemporary society, I briefly describe what "modern" and, therefore, what "post-modern" mean. I will go on to suggest that the components—the building blocks—that make up a community of meaning are nothing new. They are suggested in the creation story and continue throughout Scripture. Scripture tells the story of God creating and redeeming a community that is authentic, responsible, both ethical and active, as well as sacramental; precisely the antidote to an alienated culture.

Modern versus Postmodern

Modernity, as described by Canadian writers Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, has four distinct characteristics. First, it was focused not on the supernatural but on the natural, the imminent and the secular. Second, it moved away from reliance on authority structures, either ecclesiastical or civil, to an increased belief in the power of an individual's mind, through observation and experience, to arrive at "truth." Third, modern man (the language is purposely and descriptively exclusive) believed in progress; that the best was yet to come and achievable through his efforts alone. Fourth, progress was achieved through the study of nature for the purpose of subduing it.² Modernists sought mastery over skepticism through rationality. Modernists sought to be, as Descartes stated, "the masters and possessors of nature"³ through science and technology. These masteries resulted in a monolithic world of economic progress and self-confidence. There were echoes of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-5) in the modernist experiment. As Middleton and Walsh summarize, "we could characterize the modern Western dream of progress as the building of a vast, towering civilization, a social and

2. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 14.

3. As quoted in Walsh and Middleton, *Truth Is Stranger*, 34.

cultural accomplishment of immense, even mythic proportions.”⁴ Modernity was the quest for the universal, humanistic, forward-moving culture that would encompass the whole human race.

But, it did not. Middleton and Walsh describe modernity’s legacy:

But modernity, like Babel, has faltered and is about to topple. The homogeneity of the modern worldview has fragmented into tribalism, gender wars, racial tension, ethnic cleansing, and widespread cultural confusion. The sacred canopy of the progress myth that gave us normative historical orientation is ripped to shreds and we are left with the tatters of disorientation and anomie. The shared language of Enlightenment rationality, technical efficiency and economic growth has been drowned out by the deafening cacophony of the postmodern carnival. And like the builders of Babel, we experience the human family as profoundly scattered in its diversity and are fundamentally unable to hear with compassion the voice of the other.⁵

The result is postmodern people.

The Postmodern Person: A Wandering Stranger

Postmodern plurality and insecurity have replaced modern unity and certainty. This has led not only to epistemological skepticism, but to social and oftentimes physical restlessness. Social scientist Kwang-ki Kim described the human being’s penchant for wandering as being rooted in suspicion of established societies. To compound this suspicion, postmodern people move so frequently that they have no place to anchor themselves. This produces a tendency, in her words, “to distance [themselves] from societies, social sectors, and individuals.”⁶ Plurality led to suspicion and cynicism that led to “anchorless” existence, or anomie.

Peter Berger describes postmodern people as suffering from “a deepening condition of homelessness.”⁷ They can be considered permanent wanderers or strangers since a wanderer occupies territory on the fringes, retaining a sense of freedom, and retaining a sense of alienation from the centre—the mainstream. A stranger can be described as one

4. Walsh and Middleton, *Truth Is Stranger*, 15.

5. Walsh and Middleton, *Truth Is Stranger*, 188.

6. Kwang-ki Kim, *Order and Agency in Modernity* (Albany: State of New York Press, 2003), 6.

7. Kim, *Order and Agency*, 8.

who is relationally alienated and often dwells in the fringes of society.⁸ In an ironic way it might be this fact of “strangeness” that provides the greatest opportunity for Christians.⁹ (After all, Jesus associated most closely with the disenfranchised—the strangers—of his culture and did not get along too well with the establishment.)¹⁰

The challenge for Christian leaders is twofold. First they need to begin to understand the fundamental cultural changes that have taken place and are still taking place. Babel is falling all around us. Leaders need to recognize that God and the church are not falling, but it is “modern” constructs that are crumbling. They must be able to discern which walls need to be shored up and which need to crumble. Leaders need to be students of the postmodern age and carefully discern if their predominant operating paradigm is truly from God or just a modern invention.

Modern Solutions to Postmodern Problems

Local churches all too often attempt to restructure or re-create modern methods to reach postmodern people. As John Eldredge observed, regarding a church’s definition of discipleship:

First [become] a member... Then they encourage you to take a course on doctrine. Be “faithful” in attending the Sunday morning service and a small group fellowship. Complete a special course on Christian growth. Live a life that demonstrates clear evidence of spiritual growth. Complete a class on evangelism. Consistently look for opportunities to evangelize. Complete a course on finances, one on marriage, and another on parenting (provided you are married or are a parent). Complete a leadership training course, a hermeneutics course, a course on spiritual gifts and another on biblical counseling. Participate in missions. Carry a significant local church ministry “load”... My goodness, you could earn an MBA with less effort.¹¹

The modern method, as illustrated by Eldredge above, was to create a program and a curriculum that each individual, regardless of individual uniqueness, was to follow. The modern way was “program” while

8. Kim, *Order and Agency*, 8.

9. See Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 16-34.

10. Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 364.

11. John Eldredge, *Waking the Dead* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 96.

postmodern people want experience that understands each individual's unique needs, interests and passions. So, trying to re-program an existing curriculum to meet postmodern needs does not address the fundamental and qualitative differences between modern and postmodern cultures. The constant retooling of the old framework has led to anger in many people—people who are now leaving the church. Leaders who try to lead in the modern way alienate their postmodern followers. Often this alienation is because the leaders do not understand that simply offering to lead another program is not what postmodern followers need to learn and grow. They need, even demand, participation. In Sweet's words, "There is anger over the hogging of ministry by professionals; anger of not empowering all Christians for ministry; anger over not releasing the spiritual potential in every believer."¹² The call to participate in something totally ancient so as to be considered new is what will meet a postmodern person's needs and, ultimately, impact postmodern culture.

Postmodern people are looking for involvement, participation and community, not another program to "fit in[to]."¹³ They are looking for values that they can anchor their souls to. They are looking for, as McLaren suggests, "one holy, catholic and apostolic church."¹⁴ The "commodities" of a holy, catholic and apostolic church are transcendence and the anchoring in the Holy God; universality and the acceptance and equal consideration of all people; and the ancient wisdom, proven to be sufficient to provide meaning and impact the world. A leader's first challenge, then, is to understand postmodern culture and not assume that simply new and creative programs will meet its needs.

The second challenge leaders face is how to inspire and motivate people living in the rubble of Babel. Many of these people are lost and seeking something that the church can offer. These people are wandering, alone and strangers in an increasingly strange land. The church is called to meet these strangers. What does the church *already* possess to offer them? It possesses at least four building blocks, revived and reused from the ancient world to meet postmodern needs.

12. Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 58. Sweet warns of a coming anti-clericalism, and tells a joke in the preceding paragraph: "Do you know why clergy are just like diapers?... They need to be changed often and for the same reason."

13. Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 300.

14. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 155.

First Building Block: Authentic Community

Christianity is at a core level the invitation into full participation of a community of values. Values are ultimately more important than institutions to postmodern people. Naomi Klein, a writer and vocal leader of the economic globalization debate, writes in her second book, “I found myself tossed into the middle of an international debate over *the most pressing question* of our time: *what values* will govern the global age?”¹⁵ They have to trust the values of an organization before they will commit to serving it.¹⁶ Postmodern people are motivated by and gather around values, not leaders and certainly not institutions. They will follow people only in so far as those people are true to their values.

In a similar vein, a new set of criteria will be used to establish authority church leaders. In the global economic efforts, followers will rally around values as opposed to authority positions, and in the church, followers will follow individuals—people with integrity—as opposed to traditional authority positions. Mike Regele, a church analyst, suggests, “Authority in the future will be granted to people, not to positions. It will not be enough, and indeed will most likely be counterproductive, to claim authority based upon position.”¹⁷

The creation story itself tells us that God values community—oneness. Gilbert Bilezikian, in his discussion about community, starts in the Garden. God created human beings in his image, and that image included community and unity in a mysterious way. After creating man, God declared that he, who was created in God’s own image, was not good alone (Gen 2:18). The mystery is in the fact that, in Bilezikian’s words, “There was one solitary individual, but he had no oneness because there was no one else with whom he could be together in oneness (2:20).”¹⁸ If humanity is created in God’s image, and God’s image is trinity, then humanity is complete and truly reflects God’s image only

15. Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002), xiii (emphasis added).

16. David Donaldson, “Homiletics and Heli-skiing: Radical Gospel for an Extreme Generation,” *Evangelical Baptist* (September/October 2002), 8-9 (8).

17. Mike Regele, *The Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 206, as quoted in Don Posterski and Gary Anderson, *Future Faith Churches: Reconnecting with the Power of the Gospel for the 21st Century* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1997), 84.

18. See Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 44.

in community. This is the beautiful, mysterious lesson of Gen 2:23: “The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman” for she was taken out of man.’ ...and they will become one flesh.” God’s supreme creation was not an individual man but, as Bilezikian asserts, “the creation of human community.”¹⁹ In Jesus’ last words, his prayer for those he loved, he asked God to keep “[them] one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:22b-23). Eden and Jesus both teach us that authentic community is a community of oneness.

The difference this makes to leadership is fundamental. It is insufficient just to learn a new leadership style or read the latest leadership book out of Harvard. Leadership needs to be reconstructed. Klein, on leadership, states, “The movement doesn’t have leaders in the traditional sense—just people determined to learn and to pass it on.”²⁰ This just might be the new definition of leadership! Leaders are to be co-learners with followers. They are just those people who have learned something and are willing to pass it on to other fellow learners. I remember Dr. Erb, an English professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, saying, “I am no smarter than anyone here. I just have 20 years of reading on you.” In other words, he took no privilege from his professorial position, just offered to us his years of reading. He took a postmodern view of his leadership; he offered his learning and reading to the group of students, but asserted no privilege commensurate with his office.

The church’s unique offering to the postmodern world is authentic community. The church is, after all, “the only community on earth that can confront the evil one. For it is the only community on earth to whom the keys of the kingdom were given.”²¹

Second Building Block: Responsible Community

The Genesis story—the story of creation itself—is one that deserves close and abundant discussion within postmodern communities. So much is packed into those two chapters of Genesis. I already suggested that Eden sets the standard for community. Further, Eden provides the

19. Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 19.

20. Klein, *Fences and Windows*, xv.

21. Sweet, *SoulTsunami*, 65.

original context for environmental responsibility. First, God's initial conversation with humanity has to do with tending the garden. The pericope intimately unites God, humanity and the ground. First of all, man was made from the ground (2:7) and God's breath for life. The connection of humanity and ground (or land) is a theme throughout the Old Testament, as seen in the Abrahamic covenant in which God promised Abraham a people (Gen 12:2) and a land (Gen 15:7).²² Further, the goal of the whole Exodus story is the possession of the land "flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:8). There is a second connection between humanity and the ground. In Hebrew, the terms translated "man" and "ground" are very similar: "they are respectively *adam* and *adama*."²³ An English parallel might be the words "earth" and "earthling"²⁴—the first being the ground or planet, the second being its residents. We are inseparably tied to the ground we walk on by God's design and command. T.D. Alexander states,

Human beings are charged by God to exercise authority over the earth, and the earth is divinely empowered to produce food in abundance for humankind. Dependent on each other, humanity and the earth are both accountable to God.²⁵

Humanity, then, is the divinely-appointed steward of God's creation. A transforming community that obeys God's original commandment will care for creation—the earth that sustains our very life. Larry Rasmussen suggests that "we stand astride global threats to nature's capacity both to produce for its human members *and* to regenerate itself."²⁶ The post-modern church needs, then, to take the lead on issues relating to our earth, not to be suspicious of tree-huggers as new age nuts. We must obey God and be as environmentally responsible as we can be.

22. The third and essential component to the Abrahamic covenant is the concept of blessing. It cannot be ignored in a discussion of covenant, but is peripheral to my thesis.

23. T.D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 130.

24. Alexander, *From Paradise*, 130, note 2.

25. Alexander, *From Paradise*, 131.

26. Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 4-5, as quoted in Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 430.

Third Building Block: Ethical and Active Community

Israelites were to worship God alone. This is clear from the Decalogue (see Exod 20:3-4), and Moses reminds them in this final speech (Deut 6:14, 13:1ff). Worship belongs to God alone, and in the place he designates. He will meet them there; one God, one nation worshipping in one place.²⁷ Worship has an ethical component, even suggested within the laws and commands. The text uses two words almost interchangeably: serve and worship.²⁸ In a negative sense, they were neither to “serve” nor “worship” (Deut 7:4, 16 [serve]; 8:19, 11:16 [worship]) other gods. To a reader who knows the New Testament, this should bring to mind Paul’s admonition in Romans, “present your bodies as living sacrifices...this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:1). Living in service is worship—ethical living is an act of worship.

Further to their relationship to God himself, Moses spent considerable time instructing how the people were to relate to each other. The Israelite nation was to be unified, a “brother [and sister] hood,” not a loose amalgam of tribes.²⁹ They were to treat each other with justice based on their familial heritage and love towards God. The family ethic shows up in many aspects of everyday living; for example, in economic laws. The family was to be inclusive: Deuteronomy repeats a symbolic triad of disenfranchised people amongst the nation, “the aliens, the fatherless and the widow” (Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19). They, according to the laws, were to be taken care of. The family was not to hold each other in debt for long—debts were to be cancelled every seven years (15:1ff). Note that 15:4, “There should be no poor among you,” suggests that there is to be an economic redistribution amongst the nation. Also in chapter 15, verses 7-8 say, “If anyone is poor among your people...do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need” [TNIV]. In economic dealings, the people were to be “openhanded” to family.

The nation of Israel needed to be reminded, however. The Old Testament prophet, Micah, called Israel to social action, “And what does

27. Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 102.

28. Alexander, *From Paradise*, 261, note 7.

29. Dillard and Longman, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 104.

the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy..." (Mic 6:8). Justice and mercy are part of the postmodern agenda, at least as it pertains to world economics. Klein describes the themes of her book as fences and windows. Fences are "separating people from...much needed land and water."³⁰ Micah gave the Israelite people—and Jesus gave the church—the simple mandate to live justly. One practical way is to give water (Mt 10:42). In the wake of the tsunami tragedy, the media impressed on all of us the importance of simple clean water. Klein's second image is that of windows. She writes, "people [are] pushing up against the barriers that try to contain them, opening up windows, breathing deeply, tasting freedom."³¹ The mercy of God opens up the fences of oppression (cf. Isa 58:6-10) and gives freedom (Jn 8:32). A community committed to the biblical values of justice through social and cultural involvement is what the church needs to be about.

Jesus is challenged one day by a lawyer trying to justify himself. He responds to the lawyer with a lesson about neighbourliness and enemies. He tells the now well-known story that is often called the "Good Samaritan" (see Lk 10:25-37). At the end of the story, the lawyer has to admit that the Samaritan was the beaten man's neighbour, but cannot say it out loud. Instead of saying "the Samaritan," he says, "The one who had mercy on him." So Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise." The lawyer's first question is about the Kingdom of God, and Jesus' last word is, "go and do likewise." In other words, the Kingdom is about doing—ethical behaviour. Sylvia Keesmaat points out the double-edged meaning of Jesus' words: "[Jesus] suggests not so much that the lawyer is to be a neighbor to his enemy, but that he is to allow an enemy to become a neighbor to him."³² Not only does Jesus say that we are to behave like the Samaritan and help those in obvious need, we are to behave like the wounded man and accept help from our sworn enemies. Can the church take its environmental lead from tree-hugging new-age nuts? Or, suggest this to your board of deacons: I was recently at a Protestant church on Sunday that gave (as a habitual part of its mission money) a portion of its offering to the local Catholic Church.

30. Klein, *Fences and Windows*, xviii.

31. Klein, *Fences and Windows*, xxvii.

32. Sylvia Keesmaat, "Strange Neighbors and Risky Care," in Richard N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 282.

Just in case Jesus' hearers are not clear about how simple and how practical kingdom living is, he tells another story. The story recorded in Matt 25:31-46 is very clearly about the final judgment—the eschaton. It starts with, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all his angels with him he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.” That sentence alone is full of imagery that first-century Hebrews would have recognized. Jesus is clearly identifying himself with the “Son of Man,” a title of he who comes to judge.³³ So, how does he judge? He judges based on ethical behaviour. He welcomes into his Kingdom those who gave food to the hungry and water to the thirsty (25:34-40). On the contrary, he rejects those who did not give food or drink to those in need (vv. 41-46).³⁴ Those, in other words, who sit at the King's right hand (v. 34) are those who obeyed Jesus' teaching.

Fourth Building Block: Sacramental Community

Two postmodern “needs” will shape worship in the coming years: the need to participate in worship and the need to experience God in more tangible ways. As Sweet suggests, “The ‘We preach it/You hear it’ [era] is over.”³⁵ Postmodern people need to be partners in ministry, partners in leadership and partners in worship. Through interactive teaching/conversation, a postmodern person creates a new reality for him/herself. This new reality very often is traditionalism revisited. One example is a Pentecostal church in Georgia that converted to using the liturgies found in the Book of Common Prayer.³⁶ The need is not just to be ancient and “neo-traditional,” but to make the traditional their own by interacting in the liturgy.

33. For a detailed description of the significance of the title, see Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 614ff.

34. The New Testament makes it clear that entrance into God's kingdom is through the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus, not on the basis of works (e.g. Jn 3:1ff; Rom 10:9; Eph 2:8-10). But, as the epistle of James makes clear, and Jesus underscores in this pericope, faith must be balanced by ethical living. In fact, James clearly states that “faith without works is dead.” Striking and understanding the balance is a topic for other essays.

35. Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 72.

36. Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 72.

And contemporary worshippers need to touch, feel and taste God. Where else does one get a chance to touch and feel and taste God than the Eucharist? It is the sacrament—the visible representation (or means) of grace. Postmodern people want to wrestle with God and then sit down and eat with Him. Worship will be total experiences in which worshippers *think* and *feel* God. (The modern-world church made people only think).³⁷ Postmodern teachers will not write sermons but create visual, tangible *Shekinah* experiences. In other words, postmodern people will worship God *in spirit and in truth*.

Build with the Blocks

Bill Hybels is rather famous for calling one church to be culturally relevant. He means that the church should adopt various means of communication—video, drama, pop music—in an effort to evangelize. I believe his might be the last movement of the modern era. Sweet says,

We aren't called to preach the times. We are called to preach eternities *to* the times... Leaders do not strive to replace the "modern consciousness" with a "postmodern consciousness." Leaders help replace the "modern consciousness" with a "Christ consciousness."³⁸

Postmodern church will not be so concerned with cultural relevance as with bringing ancient truth to future people. The community of faith will be at once socially and environmentally just, and sacramentally worshipful. It will "go and do likewise" by bringing water to those who are thirsty. It will lead the way in tearing down the fences of oppression and opening the windows of freedom. We will, to use an ancient man's words, "Love the Lord with all our hearts...and our neighbour as ourselves."

37. Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 43.

38. Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims*, 48.

Further Reading about the Postmodern or “Emergent” Church as suggested in www.emergentvillage.com:

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