

RELEVANT GOSPEL CONTOURS FOR MINISTRY TO STUDENTS IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

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Crucial to any gospel ministry is the evaluation and examination of effective ministry. The very nature of Christian ministry is likened very much to the labor of a farmer. Soil is prepared, seed is sown, fertilizer is added, water is poured on, the crops are tended, growth is evidenced, fruit is yielded and harvested, and so on. Because youth ministry takes place over a certain window of time, and during a certain season of life, it can sometimes be difficult to examine fruitfulness or effectiveness in this type of ministry. This said, however, it must be done. It is important to ask questions like, "What is the typical spiritual maturity of a graduating senior from this ministry?" or, "Do we see evidences of growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ in the lives of students graduating from this ministry?"

As evaluation of ministry to students in America is made, the results are not altogether encouraging. According to recent studies, only one out of three teens graduating from high school plans to attend church after leaving his or her household. As well, though ministries to youth are abounding, there has been no significant increase in the overall attendance of teenagers in churches and ministry in ten years.¹ On a large scale, ministry to the hearts of the current youth generation is failing to make any sweeping impact, and is failing not only in the area of evangelism, but in mere retention as well.

In discussing the woes of current youth ministry and Christian faith in America in general, it becomes prudent, perhaps, to hone in on the topic of postmodernism. Could the unfruitfulness of youth ministry efforts over the last ten to fifteen years be the result of failing to recognize the mammoth cultural shifts in current society? The aim of this discourse is to evaluate current shortcomings and possible improvements in ministry to students by examining the gospel in its current postmodern context, much as Stanley Grenz has done in *A Primer on Postmodernism*, and Jimmy Long in *Generating Hope*. Because we have already failed to see or to respond to the changing contours, we are fighting an uphill battle. Still, it is possible that youth ministries and churches can get back on the cutting-edge contours of the day for effective and fruitful ministry. In addition, the church must learn again the hard lesson of "keeping in step with the Spirit" in order not to miss the next wave of contours that will certainly make it necessary to look at ministry differently in the future. In fact, leaning this lesson and taking it to heart may be the most important outcome of getting back the church's leading edge. We must not only know where we are chronologically, but where we are headed as well. Hopefully, taking stock of both Long's and Grenz's contours will challenge current youth ministry to examine its paradigms, and will ultimately lead to greater fruitfulness.

In short, youth ministry must shift from a crowd paradigm to an equipping paradigm for ministry in order to be effective in the current postmodern culture. Whenever a dominant view of Christian identification, persuasion and ideology appears to break down, new approaches to ministry and discipleship need to be developed and old ones revisited.

For example, one of the features of the postmodern context is the fragmentation of generational categories. Unlike the more homogenous youth culture of thirty or forty years ago, today we find literally hundreds of youth subcultures, and this makes reaching youth in any given area a greater challenge. One result of this is that community youth “rallies” for evangelism become more difficult to program and to achieve. The prescription, perhaps, is to do more grassroots, niche ministry, focusing on certain subcultures. In a local church ministry, teams of adults and students could be deployed to minister to specific mission fields, etc. Ministry to students must become highly relational and communal, focusing on grounding young people in the truth and ministering to the family as a whole.

Because of the erosion of Christianity as a culturally dominant worldview in the United States, ministry to youth must become more mission minded than maintenance minded. In postmodernity, established and time-honored institutions are viewed with skepticism at best, and with absolute hatred and resentment at worst. This means that churches and youth ministries cannot expect the lost, hurting and searching to come knocking down their doors to find out more. The postmodern shift should push and propel the church and her ministries to be swift on their feet, ready to be mobilized, with a mission burning in their hearts for the lost and for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Understanding some of the major underpinnings of a postmodern worldview will enable churches and ministries to carry out specific, contextualized apologetics to bring the good news of the gospel to the rising generations. Clues to the forces shaping the unredeemed worldview already lie before those who labor for the gospel. It is time to examine these contours both thoroughly and prayerfully. Ministries are dwindling and failing for lack of understanding.

To help teach others what it means to study and evaluate the current contours of the gospel in the postmodern context, Stanley Grenz insightfully notes,

“Part of the Christian calling is to appraise any new ethos that shapes the culture in which God calls believers to live as His people...This mandate demands that we explore the contours of the gospel in a postmodern context. What biblical emphases concerning God’s saving work resonate with the longings and concerns of the emerging generation?”²

Grenz is not advocating an abandonment of all doctrine and instruction that falls outside the resonating pulses of a people. However, these pulses should be and will be the onramps for the gospel to reach the minds and hearts of the emerging postmodern generation.

The first contour that Grenz mentions is the idea that postmodernism is post-individualistic. In modernity, the autonomous self was celebrated and worshiped as the ultimate goal of man. Postmodernism rejects this product of the enlightenment and emphasizes the individual within the context of community. While it is important not to neglect the individual responsibility that every human being has before God, we must revisit the importance of growth, discipleship and even evangelism in the context of community. Though small groups have been emphasized to a great degree in Christian circles for many years, true community is rare in most youth ministries. Many youth ministries have a small group time, but few have real community. True community embodies the realities of accountability, trust, service towards one another, and authentic love and concern for all within the community. It is not uncommon that students who attend the same youth ministry on Sunday evening do not even acknowledge one another in the hallways of school the very next day.

Youth ministries and churches must work to foster honest and authentic community. This takes time, effort, and a willingness to become vulnerable and transparent. The concept of community is huge in the postmodern world. In the minds of many young people, truth is fashioned through their personal experience in any given community. It is crucial that students be linked into genuine community where they can witness other students truly living for God and working out their salvation with “fear and trembling.” Another reason youth ministry must foster community among young people is the continual breakdown of the family unit as an intact community. Even when families are intact, the busy lifestyles of two working parents, the continual media drip and the ever-increasing mobility of people often stifles community. As Ron Hutchcraft notes, many students grow up without community, which leads to a state of loneliness,

“One of the reasons for this deep loneliness is that kids have largely grown up alone. They go home to an empty house, where they are raised by the flickering blue parent called TV. They spend hours and hours alone in the little kingdoms called their bedrooms.”³

As a result, one of the great biblical themes that needs to be ingrained in this generation is *adoption* theology. This is the truth that through Christ we have been given a spirit of adoption to become the sons and daughters of God. In modernity, there is a tremendous focus on being justified from our guilt from sin. Not only are we justified, but adopted as well.⁴ It is important that young people understand in their hearts that they have been adopted into the family of God on the day of their salvation. To know that they have been justified from the guilt of

sin is not invalid. However, the contour of adoption from shame can become a relevant onramp for ministry. Program-driven youth ministry seeks people to fuel the machinery of the program. Mission-driven youth ministry cultivates people in community and mobilizes them towards the will and call of God. Godly communities of students will become the lighthouses of entire communities. The witness of students living for the glory of God and reinforcing truth to one another in this context will become the strongest apologetic of the day. For a generation that determines truth from its communal contexts, the presence of God and the very truth that sets people free will shine brightly in a world groping in darkness. The issue of community as a focal point for youth ministry in a postmodern context cannot be overstated. If young people cannot find a place to cultivate meaningful friendships while connecting with God together, then they will go somewhere else. As John Ruhlman states,

“For the twenty-first century, it is clear that God is creating ministry models to help students, families and churches connect with God and each other. All over the world these models have one thing in common: they’re ministries of small groups modeled after Jesus’ ministry.”⁵

The issue of preferences is another major attribute of the postmodern worldview. In fact, even textbook definitions of postmodernism vary from one another, with only one aspect remaining constant: the complete abandonment of one universal worldview. In other words, the one thing scholars agree upon unanimously with regards to postmodernism is that it denies absolute truth. Stanley Grenz, in *A Primer on Postmodernism*, describes this condition as a “loss of centeredness.”⁶ Out is the idea of a “universe,” and in is the idea of a “multi-verse.” The problem of preferences in ministry to students in such a setting is enormous, and must be dealt with on a variety of levels.

Because the loss of absolute truth is a given in our culture (only 28% of the population believes in absolute truth⁷), many problems arise. For one, young people have a hard time accepting the authority of Scripture. Evangelism efforts can no longer assume that unbelieving kids are going start on the premise that the Bible is the Word of God. They tend to view the Bible as just another book among many. This has strong implications for how the church should change outreach. Shifting to more intentional, highly relational evangelism may prove to be a more fruitful strategy for winning the lost. Incarnational ministry becomes unquestionably important because the lost are formulating truth through the context of their accepted community. When the community is the Body of Christ, great things are able to happen. When the community is secular worldview, detrimental things are the inevitable result.

Another problem that arises out of the uncenteredness of postmodernism is the loss of one unifying metanarrative. In other words, under the tenets of postmodernism, there exists no single, unifying life purpose that applies to

everyone. Everyone has his own story that stands alone and interprets itself. There is no rhyme or reason. There is no collective purpose or goal. There are only millions of lives, fragmented and clumped together, but no unifying song. This view perpetuates gloom and despair. Youth ministries must work hard to combat the loss of metanarrative and to teach God's redemptive history as the "mega-narrative" that makes sense of life and ties together past, present and future in light of God's eternal plan. We call this redemptive history God's story. Students need desperately to know that life is not a random series of video clips and manipulated sound bites, but rather an eternally important thread woven into the fabric of God's redemptive tapestry. One researcher concludes this way, "Any Christian education that gives students facts without vision has failed."⁸

One of the tragic mistakes in youth ministry is to exhort students to serve God in a vacuum. They need more than just theological facts; they need theological reasons as well. We must teach, model and demonstrate the Christian life in light of God's big picture. In other words, youth need to know that their Christian life is to be lived not in isolation, but before a God who is redeeming the nations. The result of this is that God's history becomes their history, and God's heritage becomes their heritage as his adopted children. In a culture where family roots are shaky and shallow, students need to know the reality of the strong roots of God and his redeemed family.

One of the major goals held in the height of modernity, or the enlightenment era, was the eventual achievement of some type of utopia. It was pervasive in the thinking of many that the human potential for progress could ultimately result in a world devoid of pain, grief and misery. Science could solve all problems, and technological advancements would cover the ills of society with the press of a button. World War I was a bit of a speed bump, but it was widely hailed as "the war to end all wars," as if progress really were being made. Then came World War II, with its ghastly Holocaust and nuclear warfare – the Enlightenment project was destined for failure. Postmodernity soundly rejected the idea of ultimate human progress, and began to identify wholeheartedly with a new understanding of and empathy for human misery and suffering. Generation X, the first generation to grow up almost completely immersed in postmodern ideology, resonated highly with the idea of suffering. Research shows that while teens are optimistic about their future, they are not optimistic about their present life situation.⁹ This paradoxical instability can be attributed to this area of identification with human misery and general uncertainty.

The challenge for youth ministry in this setting is to allow suffering and cost to be a real part of the discipleship program. If we show forth a brand of Christianity that is without risk, cost and adventure, then we sell the gospel short of its whole teaching. Jesus is known as Isaiah's suffering servant (Isa. 53). One of the dangers of youth ministry is that we create a plastic, isolated experience that is consumer driven and has no price tag. In its worst form, we portray Jesus as feeble and poor, a Messiah who needs people to "accept" him. Students in

this generation are well acquainted with suffering. School shootings, and awareness of global famine, war and unrest are in their faces daily. They know the world as a place of hardship and suffering. They need to see that Christianity costs something, that it is not just entertainment and self-oriented activities. Calling our youth to high standards and acquainting them with a Christianity that sweats and bleeds and “cries out in the night” would go a long way toward authenticating the gospel for this generation. The glorious truth is that the world suffers in vain, but that the people of God do not. We suffer for an eternal, redemptive purpose. The church and its ministries to students have an apologetic for suffering that the world cannot offer. We must seize upon this opportunity.

The presence of the phenomena of virtual reality in our culture also cannot be ignored. It is a perfect machine for the support and perpetuation of the postmodern worldview. What began with “is it live or is it Memorex?” advertisements is now in full bloom. Virtual reality can often be used to encourage the idea that there is no absolute truth because of the way it blurs and distorts realities. Cinematography is a perfect example of how film can be edited and manipulated to create a movie that portrays itself as one real, seamless sequence of events, when in fact it was shot over months of time in five different locations with stunt doubles, special effects and other concoctions. The movie becomes a reality because our senses perceive it that way. This blurring of the distinctions between actual reality and perceived reality can become a true danger (this is not to say that virtual reality is inherently evil, for there are obvious applications in which it is a great tool). Over time, it becomes difficult for people to determine fact from fiction. This is especially true for students growing up immersed in virtual reality.

The challenge for youth ministry is to cut through image and appearance to the ultimate realities, and to call young people to face up to them. Youth ministries that promote leaders based on popularity and charisma rather than on character and substance are falling into the world’s trap of “image is everything.”

Another contour of the Gospel in a postmodern society is the fact that it must be, as Grenz points out, post-rationalistic. Postmoderns are not satisfied with, nor is all their reality shaped by, knowledge alone. They not only want to know about God, but to experience his presence and power as well. This is an area, postmodern or not, that the church and its ministries should be advocating anyway. Grenz points out the necessity of more than rational Christianity by saying,

“We must make room for the concept of ‘mystery’ – not as an irrational complement to the rational but as a reminder that the fundamental reality of God transcends human rationality.”¹⁰

It is critical that in youth ministries we allow time for students truly to connect with God. Efforts need to be made to create environments of worship in student

ministry. Canned, controlled meetings that allow no room for the Holy Spirit to minister among students must be eliminated. Knowledge of God in good teaching is good. Fellowship among peers is good. When students corporately and individually connect with the Holy God, their lives can be truly transformed. Allowing God to have free reign over ministries and meetings is the order of the day. Structure is both godly and important, but allowing the wind of God's presence to blow is the necessary ingredient for his life and power. Christianity is all about walking in the presence and power of God. Everyday as a believer is an experience with his redeeming presence. This is a hallmark of the Christian experience, and should be a witness and an attraction to a dying world seeking a touch, experience or encounter with God. We must be willing and eager to yield control to the Spirit of God within our ministries. Students are changed in his presence.

These are some of the major contours of the gospel in a postmodern context, but it is also important to note that one of the hallmarks of the current age is the fluid nature in which change takes place. One of the challenges facing youth ministries and churches is how to stay ahead of the cultural curve. In some ways, tracking cultural trends is as difficult as decoding the German "Enigma" from World War II. The dividends, however, will prove great if we remain attuned to the characteristics of our life and times. The pitfall to avoid is thinking that what works now will always continue to prove effective. This is how the church's ministries often fall into periods of ineffectiveness. An example of this is discovered when we see Generation X used as a term to describe all postmoderns. The fact is that Generation X is really only the first wave of people to grow up completely immersed in postmodern ideology. The current crop of young people is not Generation X (some are labeling them "Millennials"). Though they share with Generation X in their postmodern commonalities, they have very different outlooks in a number of areas. For example, cultural observers note that the "Millennials" are very achievement oriented, and some even believe they will be the "next great generation."¹¹ Generation X, on the other hand, is often considered lazy, unmotivated, pessimistic and slack.

A sub-contour that should be considered when ministering to millennials is their belief regarding salvation. Reports show that nearly two out of three teenagers (Christian teens included) wrongly believe that salvation is obtained through being good and doing good works!¹² Salvation is not achieved through achievement, but by grace alone.

The achievement-oriented nature of the current postmodern youth generation also might be usefully directed toward seeking first the kingdom of God. Millennials are spending more time on school projects, sports, chores and reading/studying than prior generations. While this is admirable, time spent in church has dropped significantly.¹³ A strong message for the current crop of students would be to challenge them around the goal and aim of their

achievements. Are they temporal or eternal? Are they selfish or selfless? Are they for financial gain or for the gain of the kingdom and of God's glory?

If we assume that postmoderns are all the same, we will fail to reach them with the gospel. We must be aware of the features unique to each of the successive rising postmodern generations, and we must prayerfully and wisely capture the relevant gospel contours. That done, we must run with passion, courage and conviction, under the banner of his undying love, for a world in mortal danger.

¹ Barna, George, *Third Millennium Teens* (Ventura, CA: The Barna Research Group, 1999), p. 57.

² Grenz, Stanley J., *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 167.

³ Hutchcraft, Ron, *The battle for a Generation* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishing, 1996), p. 20.

⁴ Long, Jimmy, *Generating Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 99.

⁵ Ruhlman, John, *New Directions for Youth Ministry* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1998), p. 30.

⁶ Grenz, pp. 19-20.

⁷ Long, Jimmy, p. 70.

⁸ Sciacca, Fran, *Generation at Risk* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishing, 1990), p. 169.

⁹ Barna, p. 62.

¹⁰ Grenz, p. 170.

¹¹ Howe, Neil, and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 4.

¹² Barna, p. 49.

¹³ Howe and Strauss, p. 172.