

Devotional Reflections
On Post-Modern Culture and Church

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Introduction

I am not sure what you think when you hear of the transition America is making from modern culture to the post-modern culture. Frankly, I am not sure what I think. However, here are three books that have challenged me to reflect upon the church in the world of today.

George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, 1998.

Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, 2003.

Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*, 1991.

I have used these books to form the background for the devotional reflections that I offer to you. I hope that these reflections help you reflect upon the mission of the church today.

Post-Modern culture: Collapse of the Church Culture

I Peter 2:9

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Exodus 19:3-6

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.

“Churchianity” is a term some authors use to describe the church without the power of God. Churchianity does not need God in order to manage the church. It defines conversion as conversion to the church. The wrong question today is: How can we do church better? I suspect many of us sense it. Church activity is a poor substitute for spiritual vitality, formation, and growth. Church people wonder when they will experience the change the gospel promises.

Given the change in American culture, some church people respond by adopting a refuge mentality. They build walls between themselves and the culture. This approach cleans people up so that church people will become more comfortable around them. Other church people respond to the changes in American culture by selling out to the culture, refusing to address the culture with the gospel at all.

In a post-modern culture, the right question to ask is this: How do we de-convert people from churchianity to convert them to Christianity? Many people in the culture believe the church has concern for itself as an institution, but little concern for spiritual vitality. In the Bible, deliverance is from slavery and toward liberty. God has a purpose, an assignment, for liberated people. The North American church needs to recapture its sense of mission. As Loren Mead puts it, the new setting of North American Christianity challenges congregations to move toward the perspective of being in the front-line, taking an active missionary role. Such thinking requires a new paradigm. Church people can no longer assume that American society is basically Christian, and thus, need to think of ways they can become faithful witnesses in this culture. The purpose of the church is to tell the story of redemption as proof of the love of God for all.

Post-modern culture: Shift from church growth to kingdom growth

Luke 15:2

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

A large part of the church leadership in North America suffers from a debilitating sense of a loss of significance. The wrong question to ask today is this: How do we grow this church, thereby getting them to come to us? How do we get them to contribute time, talent, treasure, and energy, to this church? The point was to keep people busy with church activity. The concern is similar to that of the Pharisee, maintaining the laws and customs of insiders. Such religious persons have often been a problem for God, for they no longer have a passion to bring the outsider into connection with God. The assumption is that people on the outside need to become interested in church in the way we do it. They have certain requirements in order to gain admittance into the religious club. The target of most of the efforts of members is the church.

The tough question to ask today is this: How do we transform our community, bringing the gospel to the streets? The heart of God is for lost people. Is the heart of the church beating in sync with the heart of God? This involves developing missional spirituality. The concern of Jesus was for the last, the least, and the lost. He wanted open minds, hearts, and doors, to people who hungered and thirsted for a lively relationship with God. The target of most of the efforts of these followers of Christ is the community. The presence of the church does not define itself by real estate it owns, but by its presence in community centers. Speaking the truth without love does no good for the spread of the reign of God in the lives of people. Churches need the heart of a servant toward others in order to gain a hearing for the truth of the gospel in our culture.

Post-modern culture: A New Reformation, Releasing the People of God

Ministry belongs to the whole people of God. People in ministry do not receive their marching orders from clergy. The digital revolution has made the history and theology of the church open to all persons. Such persons discover the passion God has given them, they discover the gifts God has given them, and they engage in redemptive ministry and witness in the world.

The wrong question today is this: How do we turn members into ministers? People do not work for the church. Many people see clergy and other lay staff as the receivers of complaints, rather than engaging in an exciting ministry. God has called us to transform our communities, not just to work in the church. The vision God has is for more than sustaining and maintaining the church.

The tough question for today is this: How do we turn members into missionaries? The vision of the missionary is for the culture and for the community, rather than something as small as what happens within the walls of the church. The church has often approached changes in worship styles as that of those who are stakeholders in a particular form, rather than as missionaries. People who no longer consider thinking like missionaries as important are those who no longer consider the matter of cultural relevance. The point is not to adopt the culture, but to understand it and build bridges to it for the sake of gaining the gospel a hearing among the participants of the culture. The culture is not so evil that the church can simply dismiss what happens in it. Too often, the church does not want to give up its language and culture for the sake of the world that God loves. The modern world, with its science and rationality, moved God out of the world. The “modern” church became too secular. It focused upon the intellectual and its brand of religion. The post-modern world leaves room for God in surprising places. What the church today needs is to create a culture in which one is comfortable thinking and practicing like a missionary.

Here are some of the areas that a congregation needs to discuss. Congregations need to discuss generational cultures, patterns of the emerging culture, community needs, building with the needs of the community in mind, possibly adopt a school, and generally get out there to serve. Congregations need to release people to be missionaries in the community. The question to ask of every activity is this: Who is this for?

Here is one example. George Barna suggests that generational cultures considers the needs of the following generations. 1) Seniors, people born before 1926, 2) Builders, born between 1927 and 1945, 3) Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, 4) Busters, people born between 1965 and 1983, and 5) Mosaics people born between 1984 and 2002.

Here is another example. George Barna suggests that the emerging culture is one the church needs to understand, particularly in five areas. One involves cultural diversity. Two is changing demographic trends, such as ethnicity, wealth, and education.

Three, and one that I want to explore with you more than the others areas, is trends in values and attitudes.

A trend occurring in America is a post-modern philosophy of life in which one has no grand purpose to life, no value of focusing on or preparing for the future, no absolutes, and no sense of providential care for human life and history.

Another trend is core values that keep the individual in control. Examples include the precious quality of time, minimizing long-term commitments, and maintaining independence and individuality. Other examples include trusting feelings to guide you, pursuing love and acceptance from others, developing competencies only in areas of life significant to you, focusing on immediate gratification and reward, setting goals and achieving them, having fun, staying in good health, and discovering and enjoying the purpose of your life.

Another trend is that moral truth is relative to one's values and circumstances.

Four is behavioral and lifestyle trends, such as longevity, technology, and weaker family ties.

Five is religious and spiritual trends that involve spirituality that do not necessarily arise from the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ, do not include a basic knowledge of Christianity, and do not include a desire for salvation.

Post-modern culture: The Return to Spiritual Formation

Philippians 3:10

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,

Most Christian traditions will talk of a relationship with Jesus. Yet, we often shift quickly to the head, giving people information, instead of inviting people to transform their thinking and lives. The wrong question today is this: How do we develop church members?

The tough question for today is this: How do we develop followers of Jesus Christ? How is God at work in the people? Where is Jesus busting out? We need to find out what they would like to see happen in their lives in terms of spiritual growth and development. In this sense, the church can become the life coach for people who want a vital spiritual life. Such coaching involves worship, the application of biblical truth to life, ministry to others in the name of Jesus, sharing the faith with pre-Christians, and cooperating with other believers in the mission of God. The church would become a school in a post-modern world. This school focuses on moving from teaching to learning, from text driven to life driven, from classroom to living room, from didactic to experiential, from private learning to team learning, from scripted to shaped.

According to George Barna, spiritual formation will help people develop a biblical worldview. He refers to Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, who suggests that such a worldview addresses five areas: 1) our orientation to the supernatural, 2) an awareness of good and evil, 3) acceptance of authority, 4) concern for other people, and 5) our conception of truth. One could also identify topics or key biblical texts in order to develop a biblical worldview.

According to George Barna, the six pillars of the church are the following: 1) Worship, 2) evangelism, 3) service, 4) education and training, 5) building community, 6) stewardship.

Post-modern culture: The Shift from Planning to Preparation

Jeremiah 29:11

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

The wrong question today is this: How do we plan for the future? It focuses upon predicting what will happen and plan for it.

The tough question for today is this: How do we prepare for the future? We will develop the following characteristics. 1) Vision, as something a community discovers together. Such a vision transforms making decisions, engenders commitment, and creates meaning. One needs to listen to the hopes of the people, look at the community, talk with leaders. What makes the church a great place to be? What is missing? What is happening in the community that is exciting? What is negative in the community? A congregation may need a visioning team to accomplish all this. 2) Values, revealed in what we do. 3) Results, for how can we avoid burn-out if we do not know the results for which we look? Vision and values will shape the results. 4) Strengths, get better at that which you already do well. 5) Learning, especially outside of the box, putting leaders in new settings, and seeking a coach.

Post-modern culture: The Rise of Apostolic Leadership

God has confidence in us. God has placed us at this time and this place to accomplish the purpose God has for us.

The wrong question today is this: How do we develop church leaders for church work? Leadership motifs of the past include the priest or holy person, the pastor, the educator, the manager or program director, the CEO. Such leaders are competent within the life of the church. Apostolic leaders develop competence with those outside of the church.

The tough question for today is this: How do we develop leaders for the Christian movement? This involves a paradigm of the church as a learning community.

George Barna suggests the three c's of leadership as calling, character, and competence. He identifies ten important steps toward developing an authentic church. 1) The business of the church is life transformation. 2) The competition of our target audience is the universe of organizations, opportunities, and activities offered by the world that nudge a Christian lifestyle or Christian commitment out of the picture. 3) We need to anticipate conditions and prepare a course of action that directs the nature and direction of our culture, 4) Before adopting a course of action, we must consider all possible alternatives. 5) Adopt a course of action that understands that effective change requires a detailed plan. 6) Churches can develop a way forward through building upon existing strengths. 7) The church can be effective as the church only if it operates within scriptural boundaries. 8) Vision involves creating a better future, which requires rational innovation. 9) Success demands thinking holistically. 10) The church cannot make progress without the Lordship and influence of God.

