The Triplets of Postmodernism, Pluralism and New Age

What are triplets? Triplets are babies born at the same time, often sharing the same appearances and characteristics. In this article I would like to explain how postmodernism, pluralism and new age are actually triplets.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a broad concept. It could perhaps be best described as the general intellectual outlook arising after the collapse of modernity. The trauma of Auschwitz showed us the real face of modernity. There we saw modernity, especially with its compulsive desire to break totally with the past, which gave rise to the Nazi holocaust and the Stalinist purges. There has been a general collapse of confidence in the Enlightenment (humanism) trust in the power of reason to provide foundations for a universally-valid knowledge of the world, including God. Reason fails to deliver a morality suited to the real world in which we live. After this collapse in confidence in universal rationalistic criteria of truth, relativism and pluralism began to flourish.

To give a full definition of postmodernism is virtually impossible. In general we can say that postmodernism represents a situation in which the signifier has replaced the signified as the focus of orientation and value. Together with this came the realisation of the arbitrariness of language. This means that words don’t have fixed absolute meanings. It all depends on the user of the words. This is true to a certain extent, but postmodernism inflated it beyond all reasonable limitations, in the sense that all interpretations are equally valid or equally meaningless, depending upon your point of view.
The impact on Christian faith is rather evident. How can Christianity's claim to the truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives? No-one can lay claim on possessing the truth. It is all a question of perspective. In such an environment Christians wanting to uphold THE truth will be labelled as intolerant. They will be urged to admit that is only THEIR truth.

However, this postmodern situation do not have only disadvantages for the Christian faith. There are certain new possibilities in proclaiming the Gospel. Because in an postmodern environment Christians are no longer crippled by the tedious limitations of the petty and narrow Enlightenment world-view, fettered by the illusions and pretentions of pure reason. Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a degenerate form of rational religion. As the philosopher Diogenes Allen summarizes it: ‘In a postmodern world, Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, such as: Why does the world exist? And: Why does it have its present order, rather than another? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings. The recognition of Christianity is relevant to our entire society, and relevant not only to the heart but to the mind as well.’

This is a major change in environment. Contrary to the era of modernism, Christianity now has as much right as any other belief-system to gain a hearing.

But with this advance has also come a retreat. Now all belief-systems are to be regarded as equally plausible. Something is true if it is true for me. Christianity has become acceptable, because it is believed to be true by some, not because it IS true.
Now how should you as a Christian function in this new postmodern environment? How do you communicate your faith to others?
Simply hammering on the fact that Christianity is true, won’t get people listening. They will simply modify your words in: of course, you say that it is the truth, and you have the right to say that. Perhaps the following methods are more strategic to penetrate into the heart of a postmodernist:
Concentrate on the fact that Christianity is profoundly attractive. If the world is attractive, it is because it created by God. The world reflects the attractiveness of its Creator, as the moon reflects the light of the sun. As Christians we should communicate, by our words and lifestyle, the full attractiveness of believing in the only living God. In this way the other rivals in the world are eclipsed.
What is the attractiveness of believing in the only living God?
* The overwhelming love of God, as seen in the death of Christ
* Relativism settles nowhere and in nothing, faith in God anchors people, giving them stability and purpose.
* Christianity is relevant to everyday life. Everyday life needs a basis for morality. Christianity offers a world-view, which leads to the generation of moral values and ideals which are able to give moral meaning and dignity to our existence.
* Everyday life also needs to have a framework for making sense of experience, which correlates with the inbuilt human need to make sense of things.
* Everyday life also needs a vision to guide and inspire people. Life without a reason for keeping going is dreary, dull and pointless.

Postmodern architecture
Dealing with the questions of attractiveness, relevance and need helps to penetrate into the postmodern individual, self centred as he is. However this doesn’t mean that the matter of THE TRUTH can be forgotten. Subsequently it has to be addressed. Postmodernism has an endemic aversion to questions of truth.

The importance of having the truth question on the agenda is relatively easily argued. One method of approach might be the following:

To the postmodern suggestion that something can be ‘true-for-me’ but not ‘true’, the following reply might given. Consider the person who believes that it is an excellent thing to place millions of Jews in gas chambers. That is certainly ‘true-for-him’. But can it be allowed to pass unchallenged? Is it equally true as the belief that one ought to live in peace and tolerance with one’s neighbours, including Jews?

The point driven home is that there must be some criteria, some standards of judgment, which allow one to exclude certain view-points as unacceptable. Even postmodernism has difficulties in allowing that fascism or Nazism is a good thing. Yet precisely that danger lies there. This is an important point, perhaps the point at which postmodernism is at its most vulnerable.

A well known postmodernist, Foucault, argues that the very idea of ‘truth’ grows out of the interests of the powerful. ‘Truth’ can support systems of repression, by identifying standards to which people can be forced to conform. Thus what is ‘mad’ or ‘criminal’ does not depend upon some objective criterion, but upon the standards and interests of those in authority. Each society has its ‘general politics of truth’. ‘Truth’ thus serves the interests of society, by perpetuating its ideology. For such reasons, Foucault believes that the very idea of an objective truth or morality must be challenged. This aversion against an objective truth and morality became the most central characteristic of postmodernism.

But is it right that truth and morality is not objective, but laid down by those in power? Does this view of Foucault not also rest upon a set of quite definite beliefs about what is right and what is wrong? To give an illustration: Throughout Foucault’s writings, we find a passionate belief that repression is wrong. So it means that Foucault is committed to an objective moral value, namely that freedom is to be preferred above repression. So his criticism against social values rests upon his own acceptance of certain moral values, which he clearly expects his readers should share with him. Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why is freedom to be chosen, rather than repression? These normative questions demand answers. Foucault makes in effect an appeal to sentimentality, rather than reason. That many shared his intuitive dislike of repression ensured he was well received - but the fundamental question remains unanswered. Why is repression wrong? And that same question remains unanswered within postmodernism. This is the most vulnerable point of postmodernism. What justification could be given to opposing Nazism, fundamentalist Islam, or North-Korean Communism?

Therefore, no one, not even a postmodernist, can escape the truth question. Everyone is compelled to find an answer to the question of what is truth. No one, not even a postmodernist, can escape the truth question.
Pluralism

It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society. The well known author Lesslie Newbigin points out that pluralism not only means a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces. Pluralism means in addition that this plurality is celebrated as something to be approved and cherished. Newbigin makes a distinction between pluralism as a fact of life, and pluralism as an ideology.

The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions, from the very beginning of the early church. Also ancient Israel was acutely aware that its faith was not shared by its neighbours. The existence of other religions was simply a fact of life for the Israelites. Notwithstanding they believed that theirs happened to be right, where others were wrong. The same pattern emerges in the New Testament. From the beginning Christianity has recognized the existence of other religions, and the challenge which they posed. Judaism, Roman civil religion, various forms of Greek religion, Gnosticism, various pagan mystery cults etcetera. So pluralism is nothing new.

In recent ages, widespread migrations took place between the six continents of the world. This brought the issue of pluralism to the fore front. But this isn’t new. Christianity was born amidst of religious pluralism. That pluralism has now re-emerged.

The rise of religious pluralism as an ideology can directly be related to the collapse of the Enlightenment idea of universal knowledge, rather than any difficulties within Christianity itself. Often there is a crude attempt to divert attention from the collapse of the Enlightenment vision by implying that religious pluralism represents a new and unanswerable challenge to Christianity itself. As the philosopher Diogenes Allen said: Many have been driven to relativism by the collapse of the Enlightenment’s confidence in the power of reason to provide foundations for our truth-claims and to achieve finality in our search for truth in the various disciplines. Much of the distress concerning pluralism and relativism which is voiced today springs from a crisis in the secular mentality of modern Western culture, not from a crisis in Christianity itself.
For us the central issue is this: given that there are so many religions in the market-place, how can Christianity claim to be true? Note here: the word ‘religion’ needs further examination. There is probably no subject in the world about which opinions differ so much than the nature of religion. To frame a definition of religion that would satisfy everyone is obviously impossible. Yet, largely on account of the homogenizing tendencies of modern liberalism, there is a determined effort to reduce all religions to the same basic phenomenon. But who makes the rules to determine what is a religion? Foundational to the recent western liberal discussion of ‘the religions’ is a naive assumption that ‘religion’ is a genus, an agreed category. But we must be suspicious of this naive assumption that ‘religion’ is a clearly defined category, which can be surgically distinguished from ‘culture’ as a whole. And within this framework it is implied that to defend Christianity is to belittle non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multi-cultural society. Especially to those of liberal political convictions, the multicultural agenda demands that religions should not be permitted to make truth-claims, to avoid the dangers of imperialism and triumphalism. Indeed, there seems to be a widespread perception that the rejection of religious pluralism entails intolerance and unacceptable claims to exclusivity. In effect, the liberal political agenda dictates that all religions should be treated on an equal footing. It is but a small step from this judgment to the theological declaration that all religions are the same.

In its most extreme form, this view results in the claim that all religions lead to God. But this cannot be taken seriously, when some world religions are avowedly non-theistic. A religion can hardly lead to God if it explicitly denies the existence of a god or any gods (for example Buddhism).
It is often argued that religion is determined by the circumstances of one’s birth. An Indian is likely to be a Hindu; an Arab is likely to be a Moslem. On account of this observation it is argued that all religions must be equal paths to the truth. This makes truth a function of birth. If I were to be born into Nazi Germany, I would be likely to be a Nazi. But does this make Nazism true? If I had been born in ancient Rome I would probably have shared its polytheism. If I had been born in modern Arabia, I would be a monotheist. So they are both true? No other intellectual discipline would accept such a superficial approach to truth. Why accept it in theology? It seems to rest upon an entirely laudable wish to allow that everyone is right, which ends up destroying the notion of truth itself. Consider the two propositions:

a. Different people have different religious views.
b. Therefore all religious views are equally valid.

Is proposition b in any way implied by proposition a? The fatal weakness of this approach usually leads to its being replaced with a modified version: ‘Any view which is held with sincerity may be regarded as true’. I might thus be a Nazi, a Satanist, or a passionate believer in the flatness of the earth. *My sincerity* is a guarantee of the truth. From this view it would follow that if someone sincerely believes that modern Europe would be a better place after six million Jews were placed in gas chambers, the sincerity of that conviction allows that view to be accepted as true. British philosopher of religion John Hick summarizes the absurdity of this view: ‘to say that whatever is sincerely believed and practised is by definition true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral.’

A similar approach is to suggest that the various religions may be understood to complement one another. In other words, truth does not lie in an ‘either-or’ but in a ‘both-both’ approach. All differences within religions are ‘differences in perception, not reality.’ This naturally leads to the idea that dialogue between religions can lead to an enhancement of truth, in that the limited perspectives of one religion can be complemented by the differing perspectives of another. As all religions are held to relate to the same reality, dialogue thus constitutes a privileged mode of access to truth.

However, this approach cannot cope with genuinely conflicting truth-claims. In advance they will be ruled out of order, on a priori grounds. The ideology of dialogue predetermines that religions can only complement, not contradict each other. Within the pluralist method you are thus forbidden to look for differences. You are methodically forced to look only for similarities. This pluralist method can be called the homogenizing approach. But, let us be honest, it is absurd to say, forced by this method, that a religion which says that there is a God (f.e. Christianity) complements a religion which declares, with equal vigour, that there is no God (f.e. Buddhism).

Pluralist scholars predetermine that there should be no differences among the religions. They have dogmatically determined that all religions possess the same core structure. And so it happens that all religions are ruthlessly forced into the same mould, a mould which
owes nothing to the outlooks of the world's religions, and owes everything to the liberal cultural agenda of the ideology of pluralism.

Furthermore the notion of 'truth through dialogue' has merit if, and only if, the dialogue is between parties who are describing the same thing. The notion of Dialogue from the Socratic viewpoint rests upon the assumption that participants share a common recognized subject matter, and that certain truths can be agreed concerning this subject. But it has never been shown that the different world religions share a common subject matter.

According to pluralism it is not individual religions which have access to truth, it is the western liberal pluralist, who insists that each religion must be seen in the context of others, before it can be evaluated. As many have pointed out, this means that the western liberal doctrine of religious pluralism is defined as the only valid standpoint for evaluating individual religions. Let us be clear, this standpoint of pluralists is immensely arrogant. It is an immensely arrogant claim of one who thinks to see the whole full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions. And it forces all religions into this so called objective mould.

But when we begin to compare religions, the absurdity of this approach is evident. The Rastafarian vision of a paradise in which blacks are served by whites, or the muslim vision of paradise, where men are served by women, the old Norse or Germanic concept of Valhalla, the Buddhist vision of nirvana, and the Christian hope of resurrection to eternal life on a recreated world, all these are so obviously different! And do Christianity and Satanism really have the same understanding of salvation? The pluralist would like us to think so. Or perhaps some pluralists would probably reply that Satanism doesn't count as a religion, thus neatly illustrating that their theory works only for those religions they have preselected on the basis of their ability to fit the pluralist mould.

The idea that all religions are the same is thus a refusal to acknowledge that there are genuine and significant differences among the religions. It is a kind of fundamentalism in its own right. Only in western liberal circles would such an idea be taken seriously.

But what is then the Biblical standpoint towards other religions? The Christian attitude to other religions rests firmly upon the doctrines of creation and redemption. Because God created the world, we expect to find traces of him throughout his creation. Because God redeemed the world through Christ, we expect to look to Christ for the salvation of the world. We believe in the uniqueness of Christ and reject every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and theologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which we must be saved.

If God created the world, we should not be in the least surprised that He has left witnesses to and traces of this event within that creation. John Calvin made a distinction between the
knowledge of God the creator (a universal knowledge, available to all peoples, including Christians), and knowledge of God the redeemer. We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save. The question therefore becomes: how can we be saved? Who is our saviour? And it is here that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, grounded in his resurrection, becomes of central importance. No other person has ever been raised from the dead and conquered death. In no other person does God become incarnate.

The pluralist agenda is to try to let people think that all religions are more or less talking about vaguely the same thing. But this can’t be said about the Christian doctrines of incarnation and the Trinity. These distinctive doctrines are embarrassing to those who wish to debunk what they term the ‘myth of Christian uniqueness’. Christians are urged, on the weak and lazy grounds of pragmatism, to abandon those doctrines, in order that the pluralist agenda might be advanced.

This we see happening with Christians who are yielding to pluralism. In response to pluralist pressure, doctrines such as the incarnation are discarded, in favour of various Christologies, which are more amenable to the reductionist programme of liberalism. They reject the idea of incarnation on various logical and common-sense grounds - yet they fail to deal with the question of why Christians should have developed this doctrine in the first place. There is an underlying agenda to this dismissal of the incarnation, it is trying first to eliminate the sheer distinctiveness of Christianity. It is significant that the pluralist agenda forces its advocates to adopt heretical views of Christ in order to meet its needs. In an effort to fit Jesus into the mould of the ‘great religious teachers of humanity’ category, the Ebionite heresy has been revived. The Ebionites used to say Jesus is the Messiah, however He is not God. Jesus becomes one of the options available among the great human teachers of religion.

Another example of the underlying pluralist agenda being forced through is that the confession that God is made known to us through Christ must be dismissed. Pluralists demand that Christians move away from a discussion of Christ to a discussion of God - yet fail to recognize that the ‘God of the Christians’ (Tertullian) might be rather different from other divinities, and that the doctrine of the Trinity spells out the nature of that distinction. So pluralists only prefer a sort of loose and vague talk about ‘God’ or ‘Reality’, instead of Christians talking about the Trinity. Because then you speak about a specific God (not just a ‘deity’ in general). A specific God, who has chosen to make himself known in and through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the Christian emphasis is upon the need to worship, not gods in general, but a God who has chosen to make himself known. This is in accordance with the revelation of the same God in the Old Testament to the people of Israel as the one and only God. But pluralism is in essence polytheistic.

What is also interesting, is that pluralism possesses a certain tendency to self-destruction, in that there is, if I could put it like this, a plurality of pluralisms. They want Christianity to be seen in a pluralistic context as one of the great world religions. But important here is to realise that pluralism is fatally vulnerable to the charge that it reaches an accommodation between Christianity and other religious traditions by wilfully discarding every distinctive
Christian doctrine traditionally regarded as identity-giving and identity-preserving. The form of ‘Christianity’ which is declared to be homogenous with all other ‘higher religions’ would actually not be recognizable as such to most of its adherents. It would be a reduced version of the real thing. If you strip a car of its wheels, its engine, its steering wheel, its gear-box and you name it, can you still call it a motor car? It is only fit to go to the scrap yard. Can you give to the pluralist reduction of Christian faith still the name ‘Christianity’? It is a reduced version of the real thing. Pluralists don’t compare and relate Christianity to other religions. They use a caricature, grounded in the presuppositions and agendas of western liberalism rather than in the self-revelation of God. Dialogue turns out to involve the sacrifice of integrity.

New Age

In many ways, the New Age movement is a reaction to liberal writers and preachers, who attempted to eradicate the supernatural, mystical, and transcendent element of Christianity in the name of ‘universal rationality’ or ‘global secular culture’. America got bored with the resulting liberal religion of platitudes, and adopted the New Age instead.

This astonishingly complex movement knits together strands of contemporary concerns with the idea that there is a fundamental identity between the human and the divine self (comparable to the old notions of pantheism and Gnosticism). To use a phrase strongly defended by many New Agers: every human being is a god. Or I refer to the next dialogue between two persons: ‘With all due respect, I don’t think you are a god.’ Her (Shirley MacLaine - a New Ager) immediate response: ‘If you don’t see me as God, it’s because you don’t see yourself as God.’

The attraction of this idea is enormous. If you are a god, you can make your own rules, and nobody can argue with you. Laying down the laws is, after all, one of the privileges of God. Unlike Christianity, there are no Ten Commandments to provide moral guidance. The New Ager can rely upon ‘the god within’. It is an ethic of self-fulfilment.
These ideas are not new. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the ‘New Age’ is that it seems to rest on some very old ideas. The paganism of late antiquity has been revived merged with ideas drawn from native American religions, and supplemented by pantheistic ideas deriving from eastern religions.

So diverse is the New Age movement that it is pointless to speak of it having ‘doctrines’. This feature of the New Age movement is perhaps one of its most frustrating features. It is open to endless variations. Christians approaching New Agers with the Gospel therefore has to adopt an ad hoc approach.

One approach is to confront the logical and philosophical deficiencies of pantheism and panentheism¹. But pantheism has a certain degree of resistance to logic, often described as the ‘openness’ of the New Ager. Therefore not logical reasoning, but rather simple and unsophisticated, pragmatic and direct arguments are more likely to get home to New Age devotees. For example: If you are god, why are you so unhappy? What privileges does being a god confer? Does it make you immune from unemployment? Or does it excuse you from suffering or pain? From death? What hope does it give them, in the face of the present reality of suffering and the future event of death?

In the end, the debate with the New Age movement will not be won through philosophy, but through the proclamation of Christ.

¹ Pantheism asserts that everything is a God or part of God. Panentheism asserts that God is in everything.
The key question is this: how do we know anything about God? New Agers are reluctant to put a name to God. To define is to limit, and God is limitless. Your mind gets in the way of knowing God. Stop using your mind. Don’t evaluate. Don’t judge. Don’t think. Instead, just experience God. There is no way of validating this experience. Just let it happen. What happens to you is God. You are God. Your experience is divine. And someone else’s reason is not competent to judge your first-hand experience.

Such approaches allow us to understand why many sociologists regard the New Age movement as a symbol of the collapse of Enlightenment rationalism. The total irrationality of the movement is one of its most striking features. It is locked into its world-view, allowing no means of entry for criticism or evaluation. But the movement, like classical paganism, is willing to dispute about God. Unlike the cold hostility of Enlightenment rationalism, the New Age is generally very receptive to religious ideas.

A few lines of approach to lead a New Ager to the truth can be the following. Consider near-death experiences, often exploited by New Agers as evidence both of the reality of the supernatural, and of their own interpretation of the realm of transcendent knowing, a domain not limited to time and space. These accounts are related by those who are thought to have come very close to death, yet survive to relate what they experienced. But none of these reports concern experiences of real death, or of what exists after death. They are simply perceptions of what seems to happen close to death.

But what if someone were to die - really die - and return from the dead to tell us about the experience of death and what lies beyond? Would not his witness be of first-rate importance? Would it not possess an authority totally lacking in any other near-death account? Would we not pay attention to such a person? The Christian has immediately gained a hearing for Christ, and the message of the gospel - in terms that make sense to New Agers. It may lack theological sophistication. It would cut little ice in an academical seminar. But as Paul said, in preaching the Gospel you have to become a Jew for the Jews and a Greek for the Greek.

What is crippling for a healthy debate is the New Age assertion that their unique experiences cannot be described in words. But as a Christian nothing stops you do challenge this assertion. Why not be able to put one’s experiences of God into words? After all, we have already seen how words do indeed possess the ability to point to and communicate with God. Christ put a name and a face to this God. The resurrection establishes his credentials in this respect. To lapse for a moment into quasi-New Age language, Christ has broken through into the realm of transcendent knowing, making it knowable and available, even in human words.

Furthermore the resurrection of Christ is the prove that He has superiority over the rest of us when it comes to knowing the spiritual reality. So we should listen to Him, as one who has penetrated far deeper into the transcendent realm of knowing than anyone else. Again, note the emphasis upon the resurrection. Christ has a spiritual authority which sets Him above others. Why listen to a New Age specialist, having at most an experience of coming
close to death, when you can listen to Jesus? Jesus’ credentials are more impressive than any New Ager! They haven’t died, let alone been raised from the dead. They don’t have first-hand experience of transcendent spiritual realities.

The New Age movement denies the uniqueness of Christ, in placing him as a an ascended master among many others. But as Christians we must insist upon the total qualitative distinction between Christ and any other religious teacher. Christ does not only teach us; He transforms us.

To summarise: the New Age is largely a reaction against the spiritual inadequacies of liberal Christianity. This same liberalism must not be allowed to deprive us of our most potent weapon against the New Age movement, being the entire Holy Scriptures. Liberalism got the church into this mess, but does not possess the resources to get us out of it. It is only orthodox Christianity which has the apologetic and spiritual means to reclaim the lost ground. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:10-13)

(In this article I owe much to what AE McGrath has written in his book Bridge-Building)

Rev. P.G. Boon
The Emerging Church

“‘Emerging’ catches into one term the global reshaping of how to ‘do church’ in postmodern culture.” These words by a leading figure in the Emerging Church Movement, Scot McKnight, catches the basic conviction of this movement. In other words: changes in the culture signal that a new church is ‘emerging’, a new church that has to adapt to new times.

Right from the beginning it is important to distinguish between ‘emergent’ and ‘emerging’. ‘Emergent’ refers to official organisations based in the United States of America as well as in the United Kingdom. ‘Emerging’ however, refers to the wider, informal, global and ecclesial focus of this movement. My focus will be on the latter, rather than on the former. I will try to describe and evaluate in a short space what this movement stands for.

Characteristics

What characterizes this movement? I mention the most important points.

1. Protest against traditional evangelicalism

Traditional evangelicalism is seen by this movement as being fundamentalist and absolutist, typically shaped by modernism. Therefore emerging leaders want to be post-evangelicalist. This post-evangelicalism manifests itself in two ways.

Firstly, there is an aversion against systematic theology. God did not reveal systematic theology, but He revealed a story. A story of which I am a part. Systematic theology, according to the emerging leaders creates the impression of finality, but during the last century we have learnt that no systematic theology is final. Secondly, and additional to the previous point, there is a growing skepticism against Christian exclusivity; stated differently: a growing “in-versus-out”-skepticism. If there is a final theology, then certain people whose theology differs, are left out – and this causes pain to emerging leaders. In stead of clinging to an ‘absolute’ systematic theology, they would rather want to see authentic believers – people who don’t have all the answers, and who may be open about their doubts and questions, but whose faiths are real.

2. Protest against modernism

Emerging leaders draw a clear line between modernism and postmodernism. They seldom find something positive to say about modernism, while postmodernism is either good or a glorious opportunity. Typical characteristics of postmodernism are placed in opposition to typical modernist characteristics:

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<tr>
<th>MODERNISM</th>
<th>POSTMODERNISM</th>
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<td>Linear thought and rationality</td>
<td>Feelings and affection</td>
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3. Protest against orthodoxy and a search for orthopraxis

Against orthodoxy – the right doctrine – the emerging movement places a lot of emphasis on right living (orthopraxis), because “by their fruit (not their theology) you will know them...” Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This emphasis becomes visible in several ways.

Firstly, it becomes visible in a specific way of worshipping. In an emerging church the entire service can be without a sermon, but there will be a lot of activities for the worshippers. During the service different groups can engage in different activities – the one group may be busy singing, the other group may be journalling in another corner. Added to this, there is a lot of attention for symbolism and the visual; mystical elements like crosses and candles are clearly visible.

Another way in which the orthopraxis comes to the fore, is in the emphasis that is placed on being missional. The emerging movement wants to reach people that are not Christians.

Evaluation

The spirit of an age is never only bad or only good. The same applies to a movement that is built on – or at least strongly influenced by – such a spirit. Therefore it is good to evaluate both the positives and the negatives of the emerging movement.

Positives

- Reading the times: the church never exists in a vacuum, but is part of a specific time in history. The fundamental message of the church, the gospel of Jesus Christ, of course remains the same. But in order to communicate that message effectively to a specific time and generation, it is important to know the times. We can therefore learn from the emerging movement how important it is to know the times in which we are church today.

- Recognising our own social location: it is true that every human being speaks about and looks at thing from a certain perspective. That does not mean that we have to fall in an absolute perspectivalism where there is no truth because everyone has his own perspective. But it does mean that we need to be conscious of our own finitude, and therefore also be humble in the way we speak.

- Evangelising outsiders: this may be one of the weaker points of the reformed churches throughout the ages. Therefore it may be good to see the emerging movement’s zeal to reach the unreached with the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ should touch our lives in such a way that we are constantly looking for opportunities to share it with others.
- Authenticity: Christianity is not just something we do with our minds or mouths, but it is something that God wants us to do with our hearts. Christianity with the heart is authentic Christianity. This does not mean that we always have all the answers, and we can be frank and honest about that.
- Orthopraxis: it is indeed true that faith without works is dead (James 2). It is, therefore, one of the biggest challenges to Christians to believe with the heart, to confess with the mouth, but to also live it through their everyday walk of life.

**Negatives**

- General: emerging leaders are so busy telling us that the culture has changed and that we need to adapt to this new culture, but their response to this new culture offers very little criticism. As I have said already, to most emerging leaders and writers modernism is bad, and postmodernism is either good or a glorious opportunity. But are the lines between modernism and postmodernism really this clear? Was modernism really all about linear and rational thinking? Was there no experience in Christianity during modern times? Emerging leaders’ evaluation of modernism has therefore a reductionistic and stereotypical ring to it, while their evaluation of postmodernism is either absent or woefully one-sided. The obvious question that emergent leaders need to face, is: what limitations plague postmodernism?
- Particular:
  - Emerging leaders tend to draw an absolute epistemological antithesis: either we can know God exhaustively, or we are restricted to the mysterious. These are often the only options given by emerging leaders. Well, it did not take the emerging church to teach Christians that God is infinitely greater than we are. Truth about God will therefore never be omniscient truth. The question we should rather ask ourselves is: can we talk with certainty about God? We cannot talk exhaustively about Him, but can we talk with certainty about Him? In this regard we have to take the Word of God serious as God’s revelation to human beings. In Scripture God has not revealed Himself completely, but what He has revealed, is certain. If we follow the revelation in Scripture we can talk with certainty about God, notwithstanding the fact that we acknowledge our own finitude and recognise our own social location.
  - Emerging leaders also tend to draw a dilemma between becoming and belonging: according to them the church in modernism was exclusive – you should ‘become’ a Christian before you can ‘belong’ to the church. The emerging church wants to invite people to ‘belong’, to be part of the story, and maybe the ‘becoming’ will also follow. Thus, there is no immediate judgment on the right and wrong of someone’s opinions. Scripture, however, shows that the church is a very distinctive community. Church discipline, for instance, presupposes that ‘in’ and ‘out’ are meaningful categories; otherwise excommunication would be meaningless. Furthermore, the New Testament lays enormous emphasis on sound teaching in both doctrine and conduct. The creeds came into existence in contexts of controversy where some
people were judged to be right and others wrong in the light of Scripture. So, in the New Testament faith’s validity is tied to truth, and a living faith does not mean the abandonment of certainty.

- An eclectic appeal to tradition: in the emerging movement there is a positive emphasis on the use of tradition. Of course not the tradition as created in modernism, but rather the tradition beyond modernism. However, the use of tradition in the emerging movement takes place in a very eclectic way. It is often not shaped by Scripture, but by what emerging leaders think is fit for postmodern times.

I end with the words by D.A. Carson in his book *Becoming conversant with the emerging church*, p. 152: “What we should strive for, surely, is a church that is full of teaching, rigorous in its discipleship, and patently faithful in its exercise of godly discipline – and at the same time a church in which believers know how to communicate with nonbelievers, a church whose public meetings, however full of teaching and discipline they may be, are authentic in all they do, welcoming and warm to strangers, and careful to apply Scripture to all of life, with contemporary probings that are simultaneously faithful to Scripture and culturally penetrating.”

For this, I think, you don’t have to be part of the emerging movement...

Rev. H.H. van Alten
1. A huge shift in culture - and its effects for ministry

1.1 Modernism replaced by Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a radical response to modernism. This is visible in at least three areas:

1. The optimism of modernism has led to disillusionment. Belief in progress has turned into hopelessness. People have developed a deep distrust in authorities, technology, scientists, and any big story that claims to explain everything. There is no big, unifying worldview any more.

Christians must change their approach. In the past, people did not see a need for God any more (He was reasoned away and they had their own explanations). Postmodernism leaves a sense of despair. There might be an open door for God’s hope!

2. People embrace relativism towards truth: there is no objective knowledge of reality possible. Absolutes are abandoned, everyone has his/her own (subjective) perspective. Religion is not tolerated in the public sphere.

Does this always mean that people reject the Christian faith? It does not have to be so. People’s decisions are no longer based on truth but on preferences. This creates possibilities for discussion about those preferences. We have more opportunities to start discussions about their beliefs and choices now than we had under modernism. Back then, many people were convinced that Christianity was wrong and outdated.

3. Modernism centered around the individual. Now, the Group has become more important and takes the place of the autonomous self. This has negative consequences, like tribalism: people have an
exclusive loyalty to one’s own group and fight only for their own. But there is also a positive effect: people feel more need for community. This opens doors for the Christian message, which is not just a way of thinking but also a way of living: in community (Jimmy Long, Generating Hope, in: Carson, Telling the truth, p. 335-327).

1.2 What are the consequences for ministry?

a. We may find we are ineffective

If you don’t notice the paradigm change and continue to talk and teach in the same way as before, you fail to reach the people you are preaching to. Perhaps you are giving a purely rational defence of the faith and they just say ‘that’s your opinion’. Your arguments fall on deaf ears. You tell them science cannot be trusted, and you find that they agree with you, but they don’t believe in Jesus!

You miss the connection because they have become postmoderns and you don’t know it. Perhaps this could be the reason if you fail to see deep and lasting change?

b. You feel threatened

There are no absolutes any more, therefore people do anything they like. It leads to moral relativism. They just believe and practice what works for them.

When you bring the Christian truth and you call their behavior sinful, you are considered intolerant (This is a fact in the USA and Canada, and many other countries when Christians call homosexuality sin).

There is no doubt that moral relativism is dangerous and also influences Christians. However, we have a responsibility to preach the gospel and to respond to this. What approach do you take in evangelizing postmoderns? If you avoid such people because you feel old-fashioned and under attack, you don’t have an answer to postmodernism and you don’t know what to say to convince them.

Are you willing to consider this: that you do not understand them, but need to learn how they think? Only then you can challenge them like Paul did in Athens. He went into their territory and argued with the Athenians on the basis of their philosophies. This is our task as ministers: to refute all wrong teaching. But we must be willing to go the extra mile and find out how to approach postmoderns in a way they understand and that might convince them?

c. People we want to make disciples are confused

Postmodernism has a healthy effect: people are not so sure, they don’t want to accept authorities and big stories. Authorities (like scientists) were the ones who convinced people that Christianity could not be true! People now have distrust towards science: it does not have all the answers and has been compromised by abuse of power (for example the atomic bomb). The certainties of the past are gone; uncertainty and confusion have taken their place.
Jesus looked at the Israelites who were like sheep without a shepherd. Compassion welled up in his heart. We should have the same compassion for the confused people in our time!

Don’t feel threatened by this new way of thinking. People’s ideas may not be so fixed as we think (and as they make it sound), especially among young people. Approach them, ask questions, and try to find out if they realize how uncertain the world has become. Even if they seem self-confident, they probably are desperately looking for a worldview that makes sense, and long for meaning instead of pleasure.

We must respond to postmodernism. We need to do this in two areas: the mind and the heart.

2. Response with the mind

2.1. Are you aware how postmodernism influences you?

Postmodernism is a worldview, a way of thinking. Do you realize how much it influences you? When the culture around you believes and repeats something, you begin to believe it yourself. Perhaps it is good to look at your response to unbelieving neighbors. Do you talk to them about their lifestyle and choices? Or do you think ‘we should not judge’ or ‘they have their own views, I can’t change them’. That’s influence of postmodernism right there!

When you know the influence it has on your own thinking, you realize just how pervasive this type of thinking is: you find it even in yourself and in the members of the church! This helps you to understand your neighbors better.

2.2. Engage them in their own territory

a) Appreciate that they start to doubt authority and certainties

To begin with, we can connect with others by appreciating that they don’t believe all the big stories they hear. Other big stories of the past, like rationalism, scientism and communism were negative towards Christian faith. People become more aware that scientists have their own presuppositions, the starting points that they don’t question. This influences their research and the results. It is healthy to ask questions and to doubt the certainties people blindly accepted!

You may think that they will also reject Christianity as another big story that is outdated. This may happen. But there is also room to make people think about their your starting points. If they just assume that there is no God and they don’t need him – how do they know? And have they considered that if God exists, he is able to speak to them and they are foolish to ignore him? We can help them to doubt their certainties and own motives.
I find evolutionism a good example. South Africa’s universities teach evolutionism. The majority of students just assumes that the Big Bang and biological evolutionism together are the right explanation of the origin of the world. We need to make them realize that they trust the authority of professors without considering the evidence. Science has already proved that evolutionism and the Big Bang theory have serious problems. They probably don’t realize that these professors are biased. In addition, we can help them realize that the Bible exposes our hidden motives. They try to find a theory that explains the world without God, because deep in their heart they realize that if there is a creator, they must serve him and follow his goal for their lives! They need to discover they are sinners fleeing from God.

Let us make an effort to challenge others. Help them in their search for truth and encourage them to ask questions, to investigate and to become aware of their own presuppositions.

To see examples, read the introduction and chapter 1 of Tim Keller’s book: *The Reason for God. Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (p. 3-23).

**b) Show that relativism is inconsistent**

Relativism is wrong – we know that. We present the truth of the Bible against it. Isn’t that the only weapon we have?

What we often don’t realize is that secular philosophers have also rejected relativism and shown that it is inconsistent. We can use their arguments to make people realize that their thinking does not work.

The Philosopher Poyman has shown that ethical relativism is bankrupt (see Smith, *Truth and new kind of Christian*, 161). The idea that truth depends on how you look at it, is ridiculous. If people admire the goodness of Mother Teresa or Jesus, would they be willing to say that Saddam Hussayn was equally good? No. So where do they get their idea of right and wrong?

Relativism states that morals are based on convention: in a certain culture, people agree on something and call it right or wrong. But this does not answer the question how you can judge another culture. If the Eskimos find it humane to throw old people off a cliff because they cannot care for them any more, who are you to say this is wrong?

Listen to people from modern Western societies: they have developed a new set of absolute moral values – have you noticed? Everything that is politically correct is the new absolute: it is wrong to be intolerant; you must be free to express your sexual desires in any way you like; gays should have the same rights as married couples; and child pornography is wrong and women’s rights should be defended. They judge everything, including other cultures, by those values. When you make people aware of their own absolutes, you can ask them if they are willing to say that these values must apply to
people from other cultures? If they say yes, then they are inconsistent because they say there are no absolutes. (see also Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. (p. 7-13).

Philosophers have also pointed out that the statement ‘there are no absolutes’ is itself an absolute truth. What reason do people have to present this view as an absolute when they reject all absolute truths?

New views like tolerance sound hip and attractive. But did you know that tolerance really is arrogant and condescending? If one says that all religions are the same, they place themselves above you and claim to have the ultimate idea of religion. At the same time, they are saying that your religion is the same as Buddhism or humanism, so they don’t take your views seriously.

Instead of trying to be politically correct and be tolerant, we should discuss people’s values and choices with them. This shows that we take their views seriously and that we really care about their deeply-held beliefs. In a tolerant society, showing interest for someone’s views can stand out as a sign of your love for that person (see further under 3.5 below).

**2.3 Be convinced of the truth**

*a) The Christian faith is built on a strong foundation*

We often feel weak when we have to defend our own views against relativism. There is no common ground to argue from. Which reasons can we give them? After all, it is just what we believe, and they don’t. It is easy to fall for this argument.

There is a thing which strikes me in recent Christian books that engage postmodernism and which I like: they show Christians that they are not crazy to believe the Bible. There are reasons, there are proofs, and it is consistent! Christians do not believe in the resurrection without reason: the Bible provides proofs and shows how central this miracle is to the whole gospel. This encourages us in explaining what we believe. At the same time it challenges unbelievers and invites them to investigate the claims of Christianity. Lee Strobel, a liberal journalist in the USA, became a Christian because he did just that. He started to investigate the claims of the Bible about Jesus’ resurrection and he discovered that at the least they were plausible; and he found them convincing. The claims of the Bible can be checked against history and writings of the same time period. And we can also show that the claims of Jesus and the Bible’s authority are consistent. Apologetics (defending the faith) is not a hopeless activity.

*b) We must be clear about the gospel*

You would be surprised how many people don’t know what the *gospel* is. Many see the Christian faith as ‘religion’. Tim Keller has made this point repeatedly: ‘religion’ means that people see themselves as good and try to do things to gain God’s approval. They believe their religious duties save them. But this is not Christian, this is pagan religion!
It would be good if we tried to find out if the people we are talking to, have the same idea about Christianity. If they do, would it change your approach?

Mark Driscoll has written an interesting book: *Religion saves & nine other misconceptions*. (read the book or check out [http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/religionsaves](http://www.marshillchurch.org/media/religionsaves)).

We must show that the gospel is different than religion! Tim Keller has summarized it like this: ‘The gospel makes us realize that we are worse than we ever imagined. And at the same time it convinces you that you are more loved than you dared to dream.’ In other words: lost sinners cannot save themselves but can only be saved by God’s grace through faith in Jesus. This is the same as the Reformed doctrines of radical depravity (as sinners we are unable to do any good but instead we deserve judgment), ‘Sola gratia’ (saved by grace alone) and ‘Sola Fide’ (saved by faith alone).

We must get the gospel right. Just like a sharpshooter, we must hit the target in the bull’s eye instead of waving an AK47, squeezing the trigger in the hope we hit something. If we are unclear about the gospel we are confusing people and we don’t make committed disciples of Christ. If people don’t understand and believe they are lost sinners, they will not repent (or only superficially). And if they don’t rely on God’s grace completely, they will be weak in their commitment to Jesus and ignore his will as soon as it gets difficult to follow him.

We must teach and repeat the gospel until people can dream it and begin to respond with repentance, surrender, gratitude and humility. Are we not stopping too early and become satisfied that people have joined the church?

I recommend that you read chapters 10-12 of Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. (p. 159-200).

### 3. Response with the heart

#### 3.1 The Christian faith appeals to the whole person

When we explain the gospel, our teaching must challenge the intellect and address the whole person (see Smith, , *Truth and new kind of Christian*, 171).

We will probably first address the objections people have in their minds, which come from the culture, from science, or directly from their sinful thinking. But we must also speak to the emotions and imagination of people. The gospel, if it is well preached, must reach the heart and if it enters, it will set it on fire for Jesus Christ. His love ignites love in the hearts of those who believe in him. Therefore, our preaching must not only speak to the intellect and consist of rational arguments. Let us show them how beautiful, exciting, liberating, joyful and ...(fill in your own emotions) God’s grace is!
The gospel addresses the whole person by speaking to the will (which is what the Bible often means when it speaks about ‘the heart’): how do you live, what do you stand for, what kind of life does it give you and others? Many of the letters in the New Testament have two parts. The first part states the gospel, what Christ has done for us. The second part then explains what way of thinking and kind of lifestyle flows out of that (see for example Romans 1-11 and 12-16 and Ephesians 1-3 and 4-6).

When a person meets Jesus, Jesus addresses his entire person. Let us make sure people meet Christ in all its fulness when we preach, teach, and visit.

3.2 We have hope to offer to a postmodern generation

People may give the impression of being cool and in control of their lives, but how sure are they and how much happiness do their tolerant views give them?

When you work with young people, you notice that they question everything and do what they like, but they have no hope. This is visible in music. Alphaville made the song *Forever Young* in the 1980s, with words such as:

> “Hoping for the best but expecting the worst
> Are you going to drop the bomb or not?
> Let us die young or let us live forever
> We don't have the power but we never say never.”
> “It’s so hard to get old without a cause
> I don't want to perish like a fading horse
> Youth is like diamonds in the sun
> And diamonds are forever.”

The chorus expresses the desire to remain young. There is no hope that this will give them joy, but it’s the best they can do. Many of today’s rap and hip hop songs express the same desperation. And because there is no hope for the future, young people are encouraged to cease the day and live for pleasure: fast cars, nice cloths, sex, drugs, and so on.

Recent statistics show that Pretoria has more deaths by suicide than by murder! And we thought the murder rate was high...People need hope. Especially young people, who look at the older generation and sees nothing that inspires them. They become disillusioned, desperate, and cynical.

This is surprising because many people in South Africa no longer have to suffer the abuse contempt of the apartheid politics. They should have better lives now. However, I think G.K. Chesterton is right: “People experience meaninglessness because they are weary of pleasure.” (see Carson, *Telling the truth*, chapter 21.)
Everything is available and allowed, but all the pleasure does not provide meaning. A good example is free sex: since sexual intimacy gets its meaning from the marriage relationship, built on faith and trust, sex becomes meaningless if you do it with everyone, without the relationship it is meant to express and deepen.

Clearly, our contact with unbelievers should be about more than ‘what is the truth’. We must also ask the question ‘what does your worldview give you?’ Even youngsters who argue with you are secretly looking for meaning and certainty. Take them seriously: they are persons with a soul! They want by all means to be happy and have hope and meaning. But the postmodern worldview does not deliver.

This gives enormous opportunities to speak about the hope we have. We should not focus on arguing and proving things; they know that many things cannot be proven. While we are convinced that the Christian faith is true, let us speak to others with conviction and love, and tell them about the hope we have. If we live the Christian faith, are humble and practice real love, this can be convincing to desperate (young) people. Can you tell others about the hope you have, and do it in a way that speaks to their heart? Can they feel that knowing Christ brings joy to your heart and changes your entire outlook on life? We should be excited and joyful about the message we have received and the reality we live in: the kingdom of God and the grace of God.

3.3 We have an antidote against moral bankruptcy

Connected to the hopelessness is the moral bankruptcy of modernism and postmodernism. Tolerance and total freedom have run their course and it has become clear that they are ultimately empty. The same thing happened in Eastern Europe after Communism: Stalin abandoned faith in God and wanted to remove faith from the hearts of his people. He promised them a good life, but in fact he tortured and killed them and robbed people of their dignity. In such a situation, people may attack the Christian faith on the basis of rational arguments, but we can respond by showing them that they have no basis for morality left when they don’t believe in God. “Even in an atheistic nation, the moral law still stabbed like a hatpin in the heart, which bleeds in silence.” (see Zacharias, The Touch of Truth, in: D.A. Carson (ed.), Telling the Truth. Evangelizing Postmoderns, p. 35-36).

Sooner or later, people will have to face the consequences of their worldview. Tim Keller mentions the story of a lady who worked with aspiring actors. They were full of hope and very motivated to get to the top. But once they had reached the top, they faced emptiness. There was nothing else left! We can
speak to this emptiness because we know that only Jesus really gives hope and that his kingdom brings meaning to the world.

As Christians, we should point out to people that their goals are too small. They center around themselves and temporary things. But they have a soul which was created for eternity, and God destined us to live with him forever.

Epic movies like *The Lord of the Rings* appeal to many people still, because they give them a bigger story than the story of their lives. Human beings desperately need that, even though postmodernism tells them big stories cannot be trusted. The hope for a king who will set things straight and bring order and peace appeals to people. If a kingdom like that is coming, it is worth giving your life for! People need to hear the message of hope of the coming king. And together with that, they need to hear that they must submit to this king and believe in him. We need to challenge young people to give their life to someone and something that will provide the meaning for their existence.

3.4 Back to the truth: show the relevance of the gospel

I just mentioned the huge popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a great story that speaks to people’s imagination. However, as Ravi Zacharias quotes John Seel, “it is truth that gives relevance to ‘relevance’, just as relevance becomes irrelevant if it is not related to truth.” A story is only meaningful if it is based on truth. We know the risen Christ who will return as judge of the earth. This truth places everybody’s search for meaning and relevance in a lightbeam they cannot escape from. Knowing the reality of the risen Christ, we must preach the truth without feeling ashamed that we have this old-fashioned idea of absolute truth. We actually have a story to tell that has meaning and that affects everybody’s life!

We are not talking about a philosophical truth or a truth ‘out there’ that is abstract. Truth is a person who has come into this world and who is reaching out his hand and inviting everybody into a relationship with him. We need to preach Christ and place people for the decision: what do you do with him? How do you respond? A Christian apologetic approach to postmoderns means that you look for openings and connect with what is important to them, but you must maintain your theological integrity and speak about God’s judgment, as Paul did in his defence before the Roman governor Felix in Acts 24,24-26 and before the Athenians in Acts 17,24-31.

In the face of Christ, people can begin to see that what they are looking for (meaning, relevance, joy) is good, but they are looking in the wrong direction (in their minds and hearts) and with the wrong motives (to serve themselves and remain in control). We were created to relate to God and to be part of his kingdom. Instead, we make idols of the things we enjoy and find meaning in. This is idolatry. Meeting Jesus means that we discover our idols and we realize that God will judge us because of them; we must give them up and worship Jesus alone.

When people are discovering their idols in the face of Christ, their eyes can also be opened for the emptiness of idols and the emptiness of their lives when they continue on their path. They are slaves,
but Jesus will set them free if they believe in him. You can only find yourself when you lose yourself in Christ.

Maintaining our theological integrity means that we speak about two things that are difficult to accept for postmoderns: the final judgment and the exclusivity of Jesus. If we are silent about judgment, they won’t see the need for Jesus. If we bypass Jesus’ exclusivity, they will just add him to the existing list of things or people they trust in, as an additional security blanket, just in case (Michael Andrus, *Turning to God. Conversion beyond mere religious preference*, in: Carson, *Telling the truth*, p. 159: “If we fail to address this issue of the exclusivity of Christ (...), then we may well find that our converts have simply added Jesus to an intellectual pantheon that includes Eastern philosophies, New Ages goddesses, self-help psychology, or even black magic.”).

This brings us to the *scandalon* of the cross. It was unacceptable to Jews (because of their trust in the law) and Greeks (because it sounded like foolishness compared to their wisdom). It also sounds ridiculous and unacceptable to postmoderns. But we cannot be silent about it. Rather, we must place it in the center because it is the only ground for salvation. It shows the sinfulness of man and his inability to save himself. Everybody must hear this and believe it in order to be saved. It explains the exclusivity of Jesus. And it shows that God has given us the highest proof of his love for us: he gave his own Son.

### 3.5 True community is convincing

Our approach to postmoderns must not only address the intellectual side. There is also a relational aspect to human life. And the gospel addresses this, too. Jesus creates a new community, in which his love is received and shared. Paul did not only preach, but:

> “Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” 1Thessalonians 2:8.

The fact that the Christian church is a community can be a strong weapon to defeat postmodernism. Since postmoderns have a desire for community and they can find true community in the church. If the church practices the love of Christ, it can be convincing in three ways:

**as a worshipping community:**

If we say Jesus is the only one who is valuable, we show this by worshipping him. Worship means that you express the value of the person you worship. If we do that, we show that he is big enough and meaningful enough to live for. A community that worships with enthusiasm and joy can be a very
convincing thing to postmodern people who are sceptic towards big stories. They can see that what we believe is real.

**as a loving community:**

We must not only be strong in studying and teaching, but also in loving each other and those around us. Someone puts it like this: apologetics must not only be heard, but felt and seen. What does it help to speak about the love of Christ if it does not change us personally and the community of the church?

Think of the hopelessness that many (young) people experience. A wildly loving community is best antidote against this. If outsiders see that people in the church love each other from the heart, this may take away their scepticism against absolute truth and the exclusivity of Jesus. They see what Jesus is able to do in the hearts of people, and they can get hope!

People get used to so talk, empty promises and deceit. Jesus’ words may sound like a utopia in people’s ears: it’s just not real! Until they see it working out in true love and community in the body of Jesus. People have a hunger for love, and Jesus shows them that he is not only able to give it in the future, in the perfect kingdom of heaven, but already now, in this fallen world.

Postmoderns want to tell their own story and are weaving the story of their life. We should take the time to listen and hear their story (Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope*, in: Carson, *Telling the truth*, p. 329). Only after listening, understanding and showing compassion can we begin to help people to see their story as part of God’s story. Showing love and accepting them unconditionally can open their hearts for the gospel. They can find that this community is safe and good for them. Until that happens, your words may fall on deaf ears.

Love flowing out of truth + speaking the truth in love: this is a strong combination. The tolerance promoted by postmodernism seems friendly: ‘you prefer this, I prefer that, that’s OK’ – but it is not an expression of love. Don Posterski, director of World Vision of Canada says: “rather than taking people seriously, tolerance treats people superficially. Instead of conveying that who you are and what you believe is to be valued, tolerance says I will endure you. I will tolerate you is just another way of saying I will put up with you.” Douglas John Hall writes: “Tolerance (...) is not good enough for the one who did not say tolerate your neighbor but love your neighbor.”(Jimmy Long, *Generating Hope*, in: Carson, *Telling the truth*, p. 330).
We can therefore say: the starting point of evangelizing postmoderns is not the Great Commission (go and make disciples), but the Great commandment (love your neighbor as yourself). People don’t want to be preached to and be a conversion object, but they are looking for true love and community. Can we offer this in the church? I quote Jimmy Long again: “The Baby Boomer generation was first converted intellectually. This generation most likely will become Christians initially through the heart or just become converted to the Christian community.” (p. 334).

**as an authentic community:**

Authentic means that you are real: what you see is what you get. You practice what you preach. We preach the gospel of repentance and faith in Christ. Since postmoderns are used to big stories and distrust authority, this message may meet with scepticism and even distrust at first. And quite often, churches have distracted unbelievers and led them astray by their infighting, lack of humility and repentance, and by their greed and power struggles.

What is needed are communities where repentance is practiced and where people are humbly serving others instead of dominating and fighting. We must practice grace with truth. Love God with our mind and heart (Mt22,37).

Through mutual encouragement and church discipline, we must call each other and help each other to lead a changed life. For example, we can keep the following in mind:

- Begin with the call to repent and believe in Christ as the only savior.
- Next, lead and encourage people to the goal of discipleship instead of church membership. They need to live the new lifestyle that the Spirit gives.
- Admit people to the church and baptize them only after first observing fruit of repentance. Do not let yourself be pushed by people who are in a hurry to join the church. Carefully try to find out their motives and take time to observe how they practice what they confess.
- Be consistent in exercising church discipline over all members. Make it clear that it is a proof of loving each other when you call each other to remain in Christ.
- Encourage church members to build strong relationships with each other. In SA’s culture there seems to be a lot of community feeling, but it is based on obligation and it is filled with distrust. People long for true community. It can only be created around the grace God offers in Christ and through his love which he pours out in our hearts. A good way to create this in the local church is through small groups, in which people can get to know each other better, study the Scriptures together and discuss its application, and pray together. People will never trust each other in a group of 100 people, but they may learn to do it in a group of 10-15 people.

Mentioning these three attractive aspects of church life places a demand on the church: we must really live in the way Christ wants us to live. If we stress doctrine over love, if we fail to take risks to love those in need, if our worship is uninspiring and not centered on Christ, if we tolerate sin and don’t stress the
need for repentance, the church will not have any power in drawing people to Christ through the way she behaves. On the contrary: she will undermine the gospel. Let us realize this and lead the church that we are responsible for, in the right way.

May it be a joyful task for the church where you are serving: to call people to Christ our savior, who gives hope to those who come to him and submit to him:

4. Examples of approaching postmoderns

I know of a few examples of churches who are intentionally engaging postmoderns. Here are a few. You don’t have to agree with everything they are doing to see that they have the desire to bring the pure gospel to postmoderns in a relevant and engaging way. You can find a lot of material and ideas on their websites.

**Redeemer Presbyterian church ([www.redeemer.org](http://www.redeemer.org))**

- Focus on young urban professionals and college students; intellectually challenging
- Engage the scepticism which is so prevalent in New York City
- Practice joyful and meaningful worship in which the gifts of members can be expressed
- Stress on the kingdom of God: it is broad, includes all of life: arts, philosophy, music, relationships. Stay away from narrowing faith to conversion. Serve Christ in all of life.
- They pursue a vision to become a network, a movement of churches.
Tim Keller has written good books, such as *The Prodigal God. Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith and Counterfeit God’s. The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters.*

**Mars Hill Church, Seattle**

- [www.marshillchurch.org](http://www.marshillchurch.org)
- Addresses young adults, relevant and challenging
- Motto: ‘to build a city within the city’ (the city of God in the city where you live)
- Strong teaching of Reformed doctrine
- They challenge young men to take responsibility
- Read more about founding pastor Mark Driscoll: [http://theresurgence.com/authors/mark-driscoll](http://theresurgence.com/authors/mark-driscoll)

**See also:**

The Village Church ([http://www.thevillagechurch.net](http://www.thevillagechurch.net))


The Resurgence ([www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org))

**Discussion**

1. How much influence of postmodernism have you seen in your dealings with people? Can you see that they reject absolutes and embrace moral relativism?
2. Check your teaching style. Are you arguing and giving proofs only? Perhaps it is time to realize that your teaching style is geared towards moderns, but the people in front of you are postmoderns! Do you realize what a big change this is? Are you willing to start thinking about a different approach?
3. Would the church where you work, be attractive because of thoughtful preaching and a loving community? How important is this to you? What is your role as a pastor to set the agenda?
4. Some churches need to learn to love the world and come out of their isolation. Others need more consistent Christian living. Where is your church on this line?

**Useful Books**

