

Reaching the Post-Modern World

The Challenges of the Post-Modern World: The Post-Modern world presents certain challenges. First, we face legalized secular humanism and a loss of political clout, as evidenced by the Supreme Court decisions on abortion and the bans on Bible reading and prayer in schools. Second, I see the dominance of science in our culture as an obstacle, especially since science itself is now dominated by evolution and similar speculative theories, instead of by Baconian principles. Third, the Post-Modern mindset of the young today believes strongly in inclusiveness, that all religions are equal, that there is no absolute truth, and that religion is not objective but a product of social development. Fourth, the result of the trends in the Modern and Post-Modern eras have left people with no reason to hope or believe in anything, though I think that might be turned to advantage. Fifth, there is a plethora of cults and seriously messed up church organizations claiming to be Christian, which obscures our message.

Problematic Evangelical Trends: There are trends within Evangelicalism that also pose problems. First, our academics increasingly fail to address issues that would directly benefit the church, yet the church follows academia as it assimilates graduated pastors. Second, American scholarship is increasingly impotent in making an impact world-wide. Third, our moderates are increasingly influenced by the methodologies and philosophies of Liberalism. Fourth, our political activism seems to bring us more antagonism than influence.

Steps to Take, Mistakes to Avoid, Resources to Revive: Most of my suggestions will be directed at the church, but some will involve academia. My first suggestion is to get our ministry priorities straight. Let us allow God to be responsible for the big picture and let us focus on the work he has given us to do. We believe the world is sin-driven, we have observed the negative societal trends, and many of us believe in the premillennial concept of an inevitable decay, so let's not worry so much about transforming society as a whole, and instead be obedient to make a difference locally, and to multiply our influence through making true disciples of Christ. As Machen prescribed, let us engage the world joyfully for God's purposes. As Moody said, let's reach and train the young. In our churches, let us make our priority to be making true multiplying disciples of Christ, not focusing on numbers, programs, or anything else, and not settling for shallow believers.

Let us also determine that every aspect of church life must be governed by Scripture, and so the correct understanding and teaching of Scripture must be our highest concern in this effort of making true disciples. Let us avoid modern theological distortions, let us avoid teaching what Oden calls cultural cures and trendy ideas, rather let us teach scripture! And let us teach it well: our pastors should be good exegetes and theologians, spending a great number of hours prayerfully pondering the biblical text, relying on sound hermeneutics, staying in unity with the orthodoxy defined by the early ecumenical councils, staying true in our teaching to the biblical text itself. This is not true only for the pulpit; there is a great need for biblical counsel, to get people aligned with God, not just feeling good. And there is a need for pastor-driven theological writing, such as that by Stott and Piper: Oden states that in the first millennium all respected theologians were pastors; it is also true that many of the great pastors have been theologians. Let us also teach theology, not just ethics, so people have a chance to be transformed by the Word of God; let us teach them how to study Scripture, and to submit and be filled by the Spirit. Let us

also study and teach people their theological heritage, to understand the forces that influence us, to comprehend ancient and reformed understandings and heresies, and to see trends and their effects.

With Scripture as a guide, let us promote true intimacy with Christ in a context of a community of believers living out the faith, fostering a true biblical community, offering something real, participatory, and relational, combining biblical truth with experiential passion and application. Let us always share truth in love, yielding not a bit on either, and let us promote covenant accountability within the church. Let us cast vision for the Christian life, for the sanctification God wants to bring to believers, teaching submission, sacrifice, the purpose of believers in this dispensation within the meta-narrative, and the biblical empowerment to it. Let us avoid trying to fit into the culture, for it is dead! Rather let us be as radically distinct as were those in the early church, unless we can change the local culture. In particular, let us avoid the materialism which is infecting Evangelical, especially American, Christianity.

Methodologically, let us be guided by Scripture, but where there is freedom let us take the best of each tradition. Let us be aware that many modern Evangelical methods are derived from an Arminian understanding of the gospel and the modern assumption that method is more important than content,¹ and perhaps also from the liberal, Arminian, and American optimism about man's ability to reason. Let our methodologies be based on the belief that the Holy Spirit interacts with Scripture in his sovereignty to bring about salvation and sanctification. Remembering that the early church had unity with diversity, let us work together in a practical way with other churches which have theological orthodoxy, as defined by the early church ecumenical councils, but perhaps also being wary of aligning ourselves with churches greatly deceived by poor hermeneutics or theologies that obscure the gospel or promote a false purpose for believers. Let us make use of technology when it is effective, but not use it to replace relationships or good teaching, and not ever let it be the driver of the ministry. Let us realize that modernism's techniques are not always effective now, so our methodologies must change to incorporate more story telling, relational ministry, and experiential worship. While avoiding the Liberal concept of a social gospel, and – like Moody – focusing on personal transformation, let us continue to show God's love through service oriented outreach. If we get involved in political activism, let our efforts not reflect hate and fear, but truth in love.

Academically, let us engage in a worldwide dialogue on theology, to learn from them, to ensure they are bound within orthodoxy, and to extend our impact for God. May our academics be systematic theologians, not just critical exegetes, less led by the liberal agenda, more closely tied to our historical heritage. May our scholars avoid giving up on the text; may they stay devotional, not merely intellectual and critical. Let us decide it is not wrong to assume and defend the truth of the text and ancient agreements in understanding of that text, being wary of novelty and critical techniques, like Stott and Carson, defending the text by engaging in the issues, not by either pretending the issues do not exist or by abandoning the integrity of the text.

¹ I got this thought from Packer's introduction to Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.