

FRANCONIA CHURCHES AND POSTMODERNISM: BEGINNING TO TALK

We live in a fast-paced world where change is occurring daily. Humankind has never before seen the current rate of change and this degree of systemic fluctuations in society. Awareness of global disasters, health concerns, societal and family breakdown, violence, economic pressures, breakthroughs in science and technology, and more have created dilemmas perhaps never before known. Our times are being described as *postmodern*. This means in part that knowledge, morality, and our experiences can no longer be organized around a central truth or a fixed center.

The challenge for the church in times like these is to “salt” postmodernity with the resources of faith and to provide a City of Refuge. How do individual Christians and the church define truth as well as find a center and security amid change and chaos? Such questions require our attention so we can truly know who and whose we are, how to live out the gospel, and how to help others experience new life in Christ as we seek to be a people of Vision, Healing, and Hope.

A STORY: THREE GENERATIONS

By telling of three generations of her own Mennonite family story, one Franconia Mennonite helps us grasp that postmodernism is not only abstract theory but also evident in our ordinary experience.

Generation 1

Grew up during the Depression years and uncertainty of World War II. Marriage and early family life influenced by war years. Conscientious Objector stand taken by going off to camp unpopular in community. Raised family amid familiarity of family and church, community was clearly defined, church provided clear-cut answers through conference hierarchy. Questions discouraged. Service to community and sacrifice for family top priorities. Committed to children’s Christian education. Faith unquestioned but fear of damnation and guilt present. The church provided safe haven and answers amid changing world. The truth of Jesus as Lord central. As children grew, faced with accepting many questionable actions and activities but continued to welcome children and grandchildren even when perplexed by their choices. Rather than becoming bitter, they continue to give of themselves to church and family where they find meaning and purpose.

Generation 2

Baby boom generation, grew up under threat of nuclear war and during Vietnam War. Vietnam shaped marriage and first career. Through travel and overseas alternative service exposed to a world distant from home community, developed relationships, and shared faith experiences with persons from varied cultural and faith backgrounds. Rather than concentrating on differences in faith perspectives, began to see common threads of spiritual experiences of other religions. Opened up to a larger worldview filled with more questions than answers, tried to make sense of childhood teachings and encounters with persons of varied beliefs. Their community spanned the globe and introduced them to a spirituality based on themes of social justice, responsibility for environment, and caring for the underprivileged. Old themes of faith, based on fear and judgment, made less sense. God of love, compassion, and openness became more central. Workplace rather than church community became focus of life goals. When difficulties arose in family life, they returned to the nurturing arms and acceptance of the home community. The gospel message of reconciliation took on new meaning.

Generation 3

Children grew up away from home community, exposed to city life and persons from many varied races, cultures, and life styles. Family provided center in the midst of variety of experiences. Through exposure to urban church commitments to justice issues and peace movement, they found the church message relevant to speaking out on urban issues and injustice. On return to home community, they found it hard to relate to others not exposed to a broader worldview and straddled family, church, and the larger world they had been exposed to. Family encouraged questioning and looking for commonalities with other religions but in the church, which discouraged questions, they experienced a lack of intellectual challenge. Without a war or draft to face, they sought to make sense of pacifism in their lives and

education. The church has been neither their central focus nor relevant to their basic life questions. What then is the central message of Jesus to these three generations?

THE ANALYSIS: THREE WORLDVIEWS NEED TO COEXIST

Three views

For many of our congregations, three distinctly different “cultures” or worldviews are present. Many persons are able to understand and, to a degree, even embrace more than one of these cultures. But it is helpful to delineate them from one another. Many people in our churches came to faith and maturity during a *traditional* era. We might characterize a traditional viewpoint as one which recognizes a hierarchy of leaders and authority, a code of accepted beliefs, clearly communicated rules and rituals of behavior, and a lifestyle characterized by rhythm and order.

A second culture in the churches is *modern*. Modern culture tends to be more individualistic, rationalistic, technologically sophisticated, college educated, and confident that science and the use of reason can solve many of the world’s ills. In Franconia Conference, this generation “conquered” the worlds of business and finance. It overthrew the traditional leadership order of the previous era, and replaced it with a democratized structure that gave limited authority to church leaders.

The third culture is *postmodern*. Postmodern culture questions the limits of reason and rational inquiry, values experience for its own sake, craves community and honesty in relationships, and thinks in patterns of story. It values spirituality but questions the relevance of organized religion and denominations.

How can the three views coexist?

How can a church thrive with these three different worldviews in the same congregation? What skills will we need to function as healthy churches? What is the nature of the gospel which can span the breadth of all three groups?

We need to believe that with patient teaching and careful listening, it is possible for persons from each culture to understand the commitments and viewpoints of the others. Our churches need conversation forums where worldviews can be discussed, questions asked, and misperceptions corrected. For example, it is commonly believed that postmoderns reject the existence of absolutes in beliefs and values. While this may be true for radical postmoderns, it is not true of all. It is essential for leaders to affirm the strengths of all three worldviews while cautioning about pitfalls of each.

More than ever it is important to hear one another’s coming-of-age stories. What did coming to faith look and feel like in 1930? What were the challenges of faith in 1968? What does moving toward Christ look and feel like for a young adult or a person from a secular background, in 2001?

Amid this dialogue we must affirm the faith “Once delivered to the saints.” In what form do we confess this faith in the centrality of Jesus? All Christian confessions, old and new, bear marks of struggles between competing worldviews. Is there a creed or confession which helps us address this limitation? The early Anabaptists, when on trial for their faith, often responded to questions of doctrine that they affirmed the creed—meaning the Apostles’ Creed. Since this creed grew out of struggles in its own era and does not affirm all we understand about faith as Anabaptists, it thus might be paired with such an Anabaptist confession as that of Schleithem. Yet it continues to be an excellent starting place for making common affirmations. What place could this creed plus Schleithem, or others like them, have in centering us as discussion partners?”

Faith and Life Advisory Council, Franconia Mennonite Conference, April 2001

Some Good Resources for Understanding Postmodernity

Books:

- Grenz, Stanley J. A Primer on Postmodernism. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- Lederach, John Paul. Journey Toward Reconciliation. Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999.
- McLaren, Brian D. The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, 2000.
- McLaren, Brian D. Finding Faith: A Self-Discovery Guide for Your Spiritual Quest. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999.
- Webber, Robert. Ancient-Future Faith: Believing in a Postmodern Context. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.

Other Resources:

- King, Michael A. "The Seekers and the King," A sermon. Epiphany, 2000. Available from the preacher.
- McLaren, Brian D. "Church Leadership in the Emerging Postmodern Culture," Cassette recording of a presentation to Mennonite Church leaders, January 30, 2001. Available at the Mennonite Conference Center, Souderton.
- Roth, John. "Living From the Center in a Fragmented Culture." Our Faith, Vol. 1, Spring 2001.
- Showalter, Nathan. "Faithful in a Postmodern World." Christian Living, March, 2001, 9-14.

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