

Reaching the Gothic Subculture

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In his book Generating Hope – A Strategy for Reaching The Postmodern Generation, Jimmy Long (1997) asks, “Have you ever wondered why Jesus primarily used stories while Paul primarily used rational arguments” (p. 194)? Long (1997) answers this question by providing the reason being “the difference between Hebrew and Greek thought” (p. 194). Just as these cultures could not be reached by one single method of presenting the Gospel, the same can be said to today that different methods must be used to reach the post-modern generation than those used to reach the modern generation. This paper will discuss some strategies to reach and disciple the post-modern generation, in the context of a subset group known as the Gothics or Goths.

Before discussing how to reach this gothic subculture, one must first understand those that form it. The gothic subculture is little known to most people. Its members, usually alienated from mainstream society, have adopted a lifestyle that is fascinated with dark things (“Goth lifestyle”, 1999). Gothics, the members of this group, often project this lifestyle through their dress, wearing all black items, applying makeup, and gravitating towards media and art that deal with dark imagery, including death (“Goth lifestyle”, 1999). Goths may wear capes, trench coats, chains, have body piercings, tattoos and spiked and/or multicolored hair (Welborn, 2001). Despite their appearance, many of these individuals are very creative and artistic (“Depression”, 2003). Some may embrace the occult, but generally this lifestyle is not considered to be physically violent, despite some recent media coverage like that of Columbine that would seem to indicate the opposite.

Those on the outside looking in on this subculture may view these individuals as being extremely depressed, considering the dark imagery and fascination with death. It is true that Goths are often depressed, but it should also be noted that these individuals were probably already depressed before joining the subculture (“Depression”, 2003). As stated in the article

“Depression” (2003), “Some youths find Gothic culture to be one group of people that says, We know you are depressed – its okay. We don’t think any less of you for it” (p. 1). So the gothic persona gives youths an avenue to express their feelings with those that are like-minded.

Alienated youth migrate to this subculture to be a part of something, but in doing so they form exclusive cliques that loose understanding of other subcultures, or even after a time, the parent culture (“Depression, 2003). All of what forms the gothic subculture presents the church with significant challenges to reaching Goths with the Gospel.

Various literature on the subject seem to indicate that there is considerable friction between the modern and post-modern cultures, and even more so with the gothic subculture. This friction goes both ways, as there is as much opposition from Christians towards Goths as there is opposition from Goths towards Christianity. Beyond appearance issues described above, there are numerous fundamental differences between the modern and post-modern worldviews that a church leader needs to take into account.

First, while the modern worldview focuses on institutional authority, the post-modern worldview perceives institutions as being interested in an individuals economic value, operating on reason only, and forcing conformity, all of which post-moderns reject (“On the trail”, 1998). Second, where moderns are very individualistic in their approach to many of life’s issues, post-moderns believe that this has had the result of people feeling isolated, meaningless, and at times vulnerable. Post-moderns instead place value in building relationships and using them to cope with the issues of life (“On the trail”, 1998). Lastly, the concept of absolute truths acknowledged by moderns whether they agree with it or not, is a cause for suspicion by the post-modern. For them, absolute truth is a sign of intolerance towards the diversity and relative values of others. Ironically, this situation of perceived intolerance is what the post-modern cannot tolerate (“On the trail”, 1998).

With what has been presented so far, one wonders how the post-modern generation and the Goths in particular can come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is unlikely that a significant number of post-moderns will just walk into a church (institution) and accept Jesus given the friction between the two cultures. It is also unlikely that traditional evangelistic programs that rely on presenting a rationalized version of an absolute truth will meet with success either. It would be difficult for an individual or a small group to launch a ministry like this, but if a local church body incorporated the right approach today, it would be possible to set up outreach ministries tailored to specific groups, like the Goths.

While a local church body, as a whole, may not understand the gothic sub-culture, Greiner and Welborn (2001) provide a starting point. First, remember that Goths have not rejected Christ: they simply haven't encountered him...[When they do] see the real Jesus, they are impressed by and attracted to Him" (p. 2). Secondly, "cut the crap and get real" (p. 2). Don't be a fake because post-moderns can see right through it. Lastly, Welborn (2001) says to remember that they "come from troubled homes-their parents fight, drink, or use drugs. They [the parents] don't have time for [them and have] left them free to find a family on the street" (p. 3). Goths will not respond favorably to a situation that makes them feel worse than they already do (Greiner & Welborn, 2001)!

The first thing that church leadership would need to decide is whether to attempt to launch a Goth ministry using existing or separate facilities. Greiner and Welborn (2001) indicate that for this particular type of ministry, aspects of the Goth culture have to be tolerated that would never be tolerated for the typical church teen. This can create tension in the local church body between those wanting to minister to Goths and those concerned about the influences on their own children. For this discussion, assume that the leadership decides to create and maintain a separate facility utilizing current Christian workers.

This facility could be a neutral location just about anywhere, in a building or perhaps a storefront located near a parking lot, city park, a convenience store, or wherever the local Goth community likes to hang out. Goths are not particular and are willing to meet any place they perceive as safe and they will generally police themselves to keep it that way (Welborn, 2001).

When building out this facility, it should be designed with multiple uses in mind. Don't make it a church with pews and long lectures. To reach the Gothic culture, the ministry leader should leverage certain aspects of their culture to the ministry's advantage. By doing this, the gap between the Gothic and Christian cultures is bridged by meeting Goths on their own terms. For example, as stated earlier, Goths are fascinated with dark things, particularly from the Gothic and Celtic periods. Decorations could include some non-occult Gothic artwork. A labyrinth would be a great touch because it is relevant to the Gothic/Celtic periods and it is a useful spiritual meditation tool. Illumination in the facility could be done with recessed lighting augmented by candles. The ability to play recorded music and possibly host live bands is a must. Seating could be a mixture of couches and chairs. Again, Goths are used to hanging out in parking lots and parks so they are not going to be particular. By designing a facility comparable to the culture Goths aspire to contributes to a welcoming atmosphere that post-moderns in general are attracted to (Long, 1997).

This facility should be staffed by Christian workers with a sincere desire to minister to individuals with worldviews that may vary widely from their own. Greiner and Welborn (2001) make a number of suggestions in this area. The workers should not fake a persona as Goths can detect that right away. To minister to Gothics does not require one to dress Gothic. The workers should not be judgmental, but it is acceptable to set and enforce major ground rules like no drugs, violence or damage to the property. It is probable that Goths will be defensive at first. It takes time to gain their trust but this trust can be lost in an instant. In a world that largely rejects

their lifestyle, staff should make Goths feel welcome regardless of where they are spiritually (Greiner & Welborn, 2001).

Once a facility and staff are in place, the next step is reaching out to the Goths. As stated earlier, they will not come to a church, even if the facility is as inviting as what was described above. This is an outreach ministry so workers will have to go to them (Greiner & Welborn, 2001). Once relationships are established on the street, Goths are invited to participate in activities at the ministry. Maybe they need help with life skills, character issues, or they may have a desire to learn of the love of God (Welborn, 2001). Maybe they need a place to come in off the streets to hang out, meditate, enjoy or express themselves through music or art, or they need to get fed physically and/or spiritually. Maybe they just need to talk. Whatever the reason, a Goths spiritual walk towards God begins with Christian workers guiding or mentoring them by example.

Each individual being ministered to is unique and has unique needs. The facility and staff will need to be able to fulfill as many of the needs listed above as possible. Likewise, approaching a Goth with the Gospel will be just as unique. It is likely to take a considerable amount of time to bring an individual who is deep within the Gothic subculture to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and to move beyond into spiritual growth. Due to these reasons, the Christian worker will need to be patient and flexible.

Some individuals have had to grow up in an age where society has a number of major problems including crime, drug abuse, and broken families. Some of these individuals have found themselves alienated from most of society, but they seek to be in community with others. They found this community in the Gothic subculture. Despite the Goths dark appearance and fascination with dark imagery, including death, they need to love and be loved just like everyone else. Like their parent culture, the post-moderns, Goths have a divergent worldview with

moderns when it comes to issues of institutional authority, the value of individuality and relationships, and the existence of absolute truth. Despite these challenges, the local church can still bring these individuals to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. By developing a separate ministry that reaches out and welcomes Goths as they are to join in fellowship with others, the church can not only help them with life issues, but more importantly can encourage these individuals to experience the love of God through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

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