

Postmodernism

Ideas & Issues

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Jesus said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 15:15, KJV). Christians recognize this as part of the great commission to be followed for all time. Long (1997) says, “The gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ, is changeless and eternal. However, the way we go about proclaiming the gospel and defending it does need to change” (p. 191). This is as important now more than ever when dealing with generation X, the postmodern generation. This paper will discuss two aspects of the postmodern worldview and how it has influenced the church.

Two of the most profound aspects of the postmodern worldview is first, the shift from the belief in absolute truths to one of relative truths, and second, the shift from individualism to community (Long, 1997). Many forces have converged within the past twenty years influencing the worldview of today’s typical generation Xer. These forces are discussed at length by Long (1997) and include changes in the worldwide economy, changes in society, and changes within the family unit.

Many of these changes started with the parents of the baby boomers. This generation suffered through two world wars and the great depression. When it came time to raise kids, the world war generation provided a nurturing, child centered home, which was good, but much of the structure of home and society was largely abandoned (Long, 1997). This in turn had the effect of raising a generation, the baby boomers, which saw the world as something to be conquered and where anything was possible. Long (1997) said they were raised “thinking that if [they didn’t] want to do something [they didn’t] have to and [they didn’t] want to feel guilty about it” (p. 39). The baby boomer generation set out to change society, often taking more risks than previous generations, and approaching whatever issue or problem with innovative styles not seen previously. There would be great leaps in technology on the upside but on the downside, this caused significant destabilization of many societal institutions as any and every norm or

absolute belief was questioned (Long, 1997). The business world was not immune to the influences of the baby boomers and while prosperity abounded at the start, the strategic decisions made by baby boomers would come back to haunt them and those that came after through shifts in labor markets and market instability.

Through much of American history, most generations could look for the economy, or more accurately, the standard of living to improve with each succeeding generation. Towards the later part of the baby boomer generation, this began to change. In order for these later baby boomers to have the same standard of living as their parents, a typical family required two incomes where one was needed before (Long, 1997). This left Xers, the children of the baby boomers, home alone to fend for themselves at very young ages. Baby boomers forsook a stable home and community and traveled to wherever the best opportunities were. This in turn brought about stress on their families, many of which would not survive intact, resulting in a high divorce rate (Long, 1997).

These events have had a profound impact on the worldview of the first postmodern generation, generation X. This generation, the children of the baby boomers, has had to adapt to a world unlike that experienced by any previous generation (Long, 1997). With society in general no longer grounded in absolute truths, and homes in particular no longer exhibiting the stability that baby boomers took for granted, as mentioned previously, Xers have adapted their worldview in two significant ways.

First, while the baby boomers acknowledged absolute truths but questioned them, Xers do not acknowledge absolute truths at all. For them, absolute truth has given way to a view that there are only individual preferences, which are acknowledged by others only after a time of first hand experience or observation (Long, 1997).

Take for example, Maddi, a woman that my wife does volunteer work for. She was

raised Jewish but now has a belief system of following the teachings of all religions rather than adhering to one, like Christianity. For her, truth is relative to those receiving it. For beliefs that some hold to be absolute truths, faith in the Bible for example, she believes that the writers were too influenced by their culture for the writings to have any literal application today. For her, the writings are useful lessons but not absolute truths.

Secondly, where the baby boomers had stable, safe and nurturing homes with two parents, and desired freedom to be independent to explore and experiment, Xers now desire community to nurture and build stability and safety (Long, 1997). Growing up in single parent, unstable homes have driven Xers to find family-like relationships through friends that they deem more stable than the traditional family. Where the baby boomer developed a strong sense of individualism, the Xer on the other hand seeks a community for consensus (Long, 1997).

While this view is reflected in much of today's television media, I have seen this mainly in the workplace. Many organizations, while still encouraging and rewarding personal achievement, now have similar reward systems for effective groups of individuals. Being a team player is preferred over being a superstar individual. For groups to be effective, team members cannot work as individual lone guns, but must instead work as an integrated team, building consensus on what direction and at what speed to move. For some period of time, the group becomes a community that encourages its members through the development of a safe and stable environment.

This shift in these two aspects of the generation Xer worldview, compared to the previous generation, is having a profound influence on the church. Church leaders are no longer able to assume people, particularly Xers, approach religion from a Christian perspective (Long, 1997). Because Xers do not believe in absolute truths and are suspicious of those that proclaim it, Christian churches must now compete with other religious influences. Rather than proclaiming

the truth rationally, the truth needs to be taught in a more narrative style, and the truths need to be backed up with actions (Long, 1997).

One example of a truth that needs to be taught to day is the love of God. It is one thing to talk about the love of God and to tell about his love to others. What Xers expect to see is an expression of God's love to be shown through actions, in church and in the local community (Long, 1997). This is done in the church by influencing the membership, rather than dictating to them. In the local community, this is done through outreach programs that help people where they are with the needs they have. Xers receive the truth by seeing it and experiencing it, rather than by hearing it and talking about it. Churches today also use an approach to influence this generation by building and using small communities, or groups, to bring Xers to know God through the nurturing atmosphere that they are already seeking to be apart of (Long, 1997).

This paper has discussed two aspects of the postmodern worldview and their roots. The first aspect is a rejection of the notion of absolute truth in favor of relative truths or preferences. The second aspect of the postmodern worldview discussed in this paper was that of a preference for community over individualism. This paper concluded by discussing how the postmodern worldview has influenced the church.

References

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