

An Emerging Culture Journey: 5 Paths to Travel

“Look at the nations and watch and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in you days that you would not believe even if you were told. “

For \$1 million dollars was that quote given in the year

- A) 1999 AD?
- B) 1899 AD?
- C) 4 BC?
- D) 599 BC?

That is a hard question. It certainly could be last year, 1999, as the world was and still is in the paradox of both hope and uncertainty. On the other hand it could have been 1899 as one commentator at the time described the euphoria of the coming 20th century as follows: “The man of the Twentieth Century will be a hopeful man. He will love the world and the world will love him.” Wait a minute. I certainly cannot rule out 4 BC about the time of Jesus’ birth.

What is your final answer?

Evangelical Responses to the Emerging Culture

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|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1) Traditional | “Continue On” |
| 2) Developmental | “Draw Them In” |
| 3) Generational | “Pass It On” |
| 4) Battlefield | “Bunker Down” |
| 5) Mission Field | “Seize The Day” |

The Emerging (Postmodern) Culture: Friend or Foe?

Jimmy Long, InterVarsity's National Coordinator of the Emerging Culture Project

Lutherlong@aol.com

When I left you last month I suggested that we are in the midst of a radical change that has its roots not in developmental or generational change but in significant cultural change. If David Bosch is correct in his 1991 seminal work **Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission**, we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift which has occurred no more than 5 or 6 times since the time of Christ. We are in the midst of a transition that will impact society and the church for the next 50-100 years. The two major questions for the church and mission agencies are what are the characteristics of this new culture and how should we respond.

We are certainly not the first people of faith who have had to wrestle with these questions. My favorite book of the bible is the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk and the other Israelites were faced with a major paradigm shift. Their worldview did not allow for the defeat of Jerusalem. However, they were now faced with the Babylonians surrounding Jerusalem. God responds to Habakkuk's cry for help with this reply, "Look at the nations and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days, that you would not believe, even if you were told." (Hab. 1:5) Is God doing something in our day we would not believe if we were told? Are we open to the possibility that our sovereign God is the source of some of this cultural change because He wants to do a new work in us and through us in this emerging culture?

Let me try to help us understand this transition from the Enlightenment to postmodern culture. If somebody gives you a definition of postmodern, by definition it is not a definition of postmodern. It is a modern definition of postmodern, because postmodernists would say that postmodern couldn't be defined. They are probably right. However, I would like to describe four trends in this shift from the Enlightenment to the postmodern,

Enlightenment	→	Postmodern
Autonomous Self	→	Tribalism
Secular Truth	→	Preferences
Scientific Process	→	Virtual Reality
Societal Progress	→	Societal Despair

Instead of the autonomous self, the tribe or exclusive community has become the

foundation of society. Most postmodern people are both desirous of belonging in a community of like-minded people and also scared that they will not be accepted in any community. For us as Christians, people desiring to come together in community is primarily good because God has created us to live in community. I am convinced that this renewed desire for community is one of the doors of opportunity for the gospel to be proclaimed and lived out.

A second attribute of postmodern culture is the movement from basing our decisions on truth to basing them on preferences. While on the surface this change looks bad for Christians because we are committed to the truth, the truth of the Enlightenment was never God's truth, only secular truth that could be verified objectively. The Enlightenment left out any sense of transcendency. In postmodern culture there is at least openness to transcendency and spirituality. Although the spirituality experiences can be very weird, postmodern people are more open to listening to Christians talk about God because they are more open to spiritual influences in their lives.

In postmodern culture there is a breakdown of any process for discovering truth. Although in the Enlightenment the scientific process was flawed because it left out God, there is no definable process in postmodern culture. In postmodern culture there is a mixing of secular truth and falsehoods which becomes a virtual reality, not knowing the difference from the real and the imagined. This change is leading to a society with little or no moral fiber. This change also presents a difficulty for us as Christians in how to present the truth of Christ.

Finally, the last characteristic of postmodern culture is a movement from societal progress, we can make the world better, to societal despair, the world is hopeless. In the past humankind thought they had the ability themselves to make the world a better place to live. In postmodern culture there is a sense of despair that no matter what we do the world is getting worse. This sense of societal despair is another door of opportunity for us to share the gospel.

As I stated earlier, I think God is doing a work in our day that we evangelicals would not believe if told. Next month I want to present how we as Christians should respond to these cultural changes. Our responses could form the basis for significant changes in our witness, our ministry, our recruitment plus our structures and leadership. See you next month!