



Special Postmodern Discipleship Edition

Deep Roots *big reach*

Into the Funnel: How Do We Know When Postmoderns Are Genuinely Saved?

While many evangelicals have often touted their theological sophistication concerning conversion with the phrase, “I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved,” such soteriology is about to get a serious challenge. As the culture in America has shifted dramatically in the last decade, so has our understanding concerning evangelism yet discipleship and postmodern apologetic strategies and paradigms have been slower in coming. We in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA are experiencing an unprecedented uptick in our multi-year conversion numbers. We have found that the shift into postmodernity and the associated commitment to global “kingdom-centric” values and issues has placed our organization in a unique posi-

tion to capture the spiritual hunger that is also accentuated by this shift. We are finding it normative in most parts of the country to see consistent and large numbers of students coming into community and choosing to follow Christ. As exciting as this is, one of the largest challenges this brings to an historic evangelical organization is what to do with people after they are converted? How are students who have “been converted” to be “being converted” or transformed as they follow Christ?

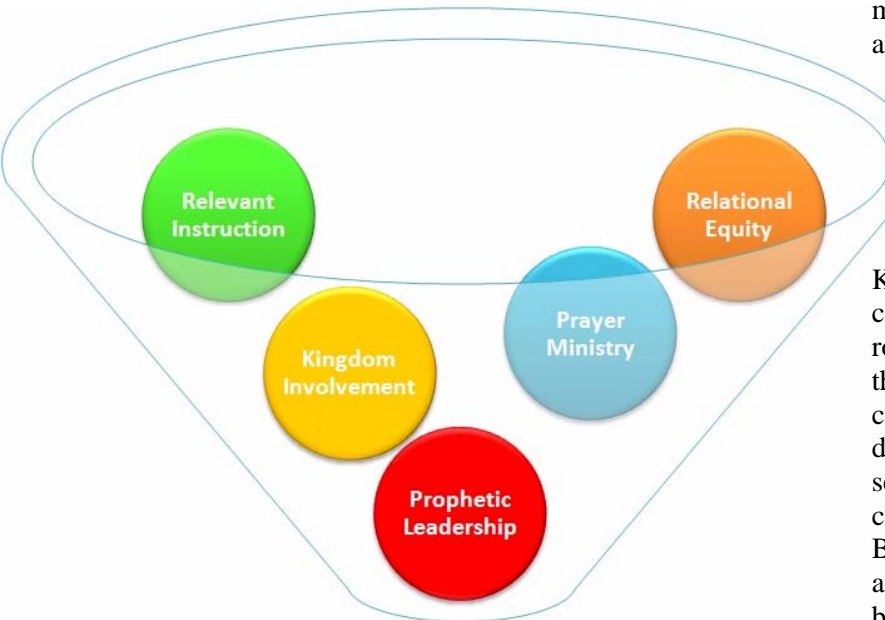
The overall secularization of our society and the cultural shift into postmodernity have made our traditional models of discipleship and apologetics not only ineffective but quite honestly often an embarrassment. People coming to Christ and community are given a compelling experience with the Living God and radical exposure to authentic transformative community and are, with little resistance, coming into the Kingdom. After a decision to join Christ and community, however, the realities of the narrow path begin to threaten the authenticity of the decision and the lack-luster vision often casted through modernistic apologetics and discipleship tools gives the new convert the sense that they missed something at the checkout counter. An example of this is Brent, a third year student who came to Jesus after experiencing Christian community and being challenged to give his whole life to God during a sex trafficking outreach in the Midwest. After Brent’s decision to follow Christ and join community, he began to meet

with the InterVarsity staff worker to study the Bible every week. Initially, this was a very exciting mark on Brent’s schedule but after a few weeks, Brent began to be combative, wrestles, and resistant. What began as a place of joy and excitement turned into a battle ground for Brent’s soul. Brent began to come face to face with the hard teachings of Christ and the Bible concerning sex, sexual identity, dependency on the Spirit verses drugs and alcohol, the necessity to be kind and honest, and a variety of other personality and ethical issues. The staff worker became confused and even wondered if Brent’s conversion was real. “Did we sell him an easy-believism faith or water down the gospel?” He asked himself. After carefully reviewing the facts that led up to Brent’s decision and the high call to Lordship placed in his call to Christ, the staff worker was convinced that this wasn’t the case. The staff worker decided to give Brent C.S. Lewis’s “Mere Christianity,” remembering his own first encounter with the book and how reading it was like a second conversion for him. When meeting with Brent, however, he discovered the book had little interest to him and even intensified his growing resistance to his new found faith. Brent continues on with Christ and the InterVarsity community but on both sides, there is an uneasiness and uncertainty that wasn’t there even before Brent’s decision. What is happening here? Did Brent get “converted,” and is he “being converted?” The normalization of ramped sexual promiscuity, the entrenchment of homosexuality

into our understanding of diversity, and the laissez-faire approach most familial and academic authorities have taken in their lives have placed significant challenges before us when it comes to discipling postmoderns. In order to establish a more integrated discipleship approach, we need to do more than download creeds and ethical instruction into their heads, we need to also deal with the spiritual and sociological needs of postmoderns. This requires us to simultaneously address a number of things in our time with new believers. Think of time spent with a new believer as a funnel by which we pour into their lives a number of distinct things. The essential things poured into the funnel initially are formative and will establish a person’s life-long trajectory. Though there may be other things added or added later, at least the following five contributions to a new believer’s walk with Christ and community should be repetitively addressed through the discipleship process:

1. Relational Equity: Postmoderns place a high value on connectivity, authenticity, and dependability. They have become disillusioned with the hopes of mere cyber-relationships and are longing to connect with a transformative community through real, face to face experiences. Because of this, relational equity needs to be established through the discipler and the new believer but not in

isolation from the community. Discipleship appointments, while not exclusively communal, should be normatively conducted with several others who share in this spiritual journey phase. The discipler should establish a prophetic and leadership voice in this community but should make space for learning to be done as the group processes together. In the past, relational equity was obtained through one on one mentoring, teaching, and coaching but such a strong emphasis on intense one on one relationship is fore-ign and will likely lead to suspicion and resistance.



Integrated Postmodern
Discipleship



Into the Funnel (cont.)

This is not to say that relational equity cannot or should not also include some one on one mentoring and coaching but this should be an added benefit to group membership to the new believer, not the central thrust of discipleship. Relational equity for the discipler grows as the new believer experiences his/her leadership in the context of community.

2.Relevant Instruction:

It has been a long standing mistake to assume postmoderns are not interested in truth; it is just that they are first interested in relevance. For the modern, the assumption was that if something were true it may or may not then become personally relevant. For the postmodern, the first question is almost always, "Is this personally or communally relevant?" Once this question is answered, later on the question of truth will come. Because of this, much of our modernistic discipleship tools and paradigms that revolve around helping new believers understand the truth of God's word will often seem foreign and create confusion. Teaching new believers the truth of God's word and the beauty of the creeds handed down throughout Church history can never fade from our discipleship efforts but we need to help new believers understand first

the relevance of God's word and the question of the truth of God's word will follow. For instance, the centrality of the trinity of the Godhead, while traditionally taught in a theological vacuum, is the perfect doctrine to help a postmodern believer understand her soul-need for connection and interdependence on other people. Because God is a community and she is created in God's image, she is also communal. Since we are connected to others at a soul-level, we have a responsibility to their well being and owe them love and this will begin to go to build her sense of purpose and obligation to God and others. The doctrine of the trinity is relevant, extremely relevant, for postmoderns and needs to come to the new believer first as such and subsequently all of the glorious theological nuances and substantiations can follow. Discipleship into the theological truths of God's word and the creeds of the Church can never be excluded from our efforts but we do need to place them first in their "real life" contexts if we hope to help new believers today have a world-view change.

3.Prophetic Leadership:

Postmoderns do not reject authority as many have articulated-they reject

authority positions that do not have the associated power or charisma figures behind them. Whether it is a political authority figure with charisma and power like President Obama or the powerful justice-ethic voice of rock star Bono, postmoderns do respond and respect authority. In discipleship, we need to establish our voice of authority and power based on our position in ministry, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and the relevance of God's word. We can do this primarily through exercising prophetic leadership. Prophetic leaders speak and act on behalf of God consciously, intentionally calling people to change and action based on God's call on their life. Prophetic leaders tend to speak for God instead of merely about God. With Brent as an example, a prophetic leader at one point would say, "Brent, God is doing a powerful work in your life right now. You may not fully understand it but you know what I'm saying is true-you need to embrace your doubts and take them to God. God is leading you to face the core of the decision you made and not to settle for a watered down commitment." Brent doesn't need merely endless arguments about the historicity of the Bible and how it is a trustworthy document, he needs to be prophetically led into the Scriptures with a voice of power. We've been given such power by God in our calling into ministry, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and through the relevancy of God's Word.

4.Prayer Ministry:

Prophetic leadership goes hand in hand with prayer ministry. Postmoderns are mystically hungry.

They aren't interested in settling for a religious infrastructure or a mere spiritualized worldview-they want to hear from God and to have him touch their lives. Prayer ministry is the fundamental way postmoderns will be able to encounter God in the early stages of their discipleship. In the context of community, a discipler should make space for God to show up and move in power to continue the redemption



process begun at the point of decision. Prayer ministry should also be experiential. Leading postmoderns through prayer should never be merely dialogical, but iconic. Postmodern prayer should include the arts and experiential learning such as the writing of poetry or the use of symbolic objects to help them grasp concepts concerning God and his work in their lives. While fundamentally written for evangelism and preaching, Mark Miller's book, "Experiential Storytelling" can be contextualized to develop rich ideas for experiential and iconic prayer. Finally, postmoderns typically have a deep desire to change the world

around them first and foremost. The redemption of the world around them is as important as the redemption of the world inside them so postmodern prayer ministry should never be entirely focused on the individual needs of the believer but should include an outward, missional focus.

5.Kingdom Involvement:

Discipleship and mission should never be dichotomized. The best discipleship tool has always been and continues to be real, hands-on involvement in Christ's Kingdom. From evangelism to addressing global issues of injustice and local manifestations of suffering and need, getting postmoderns involved in the work of the Kingdom is central. Kingdom work shouldn't be seen as something that occurs after a person is rooted or grounded in the truths of Christianity-it is how those truths get rooted in their hearts and minds. Finding ways for new believers to do evangelism, serve, reach out, and apply their gifts and talents to real needs is as important as teaching them the Bible and how to pray for in so doing we connect who God has made them to be and their purpose in community with the truths and person of God. Often for this justice generation, kingdom involvement will actually play a significant role in their initial conversion but as they are being redeemed, continued involvement in community for the Kingdom will be key to their maturation. Missional Christians grow out of missional work led by prophetic leaders and to set this as a precedent at the point of decision and

early on in the discipleship process is key. Regular application discussion opportunities in the context of community will bring such work into focus and help to avoid the all too common drift toward mere activism instead of discipleship to Christ.

Finally, we need to recognize that not only have new contours in our society emerged in terms of culture and values, but the old restraints of the Judeo-Christian worldview have eroded. Because of this, the typical assumptions we were able to make concerning issues like sexuality, honesty, and the intrinsic value of life can no longer be made. The boundaries of social convention aided us in discipleship in that we could begin with general assumptions concerning what was right and wrong-an appeal to the normative moral code or law.

Very frequently now *after* a person becomes a Christian, they begin to wrestle with a new moral code that accompanies the new worldview they are adopting that is at odds with a lifetime of formal education and socialization, particularly concerning sex and sexual identity. At one event, after speaking I was approached by a young Latino student who, with tears in her eyes after professing Christ, asked sincerely, "Now, what does God have to say about the fact that I'm a lesbian?" Addressing such issues *after* conversion is difficult for some with still others disqualifying the conversion due to such evidence of known sin still lingering in the person's life. However, the process of postmodern conversion can and should make room for ap-

proaching new believer's lifestyle and moral convictions in the same way the old modernistic approach did for issues of intellectual assent and submission. This is to say that just as we expected a new believer to *eventually* come to understand and submit their mind to a good deal of core theological truths *after* conversion, like the doctrine of the trinity, so in this new postmodern age we expect new believers to repent and grow into their conviction concerning issues of sexual identity and sexual promiscuity. Evidence amongst the Corinthians to this end is ample and if we broaden the issues out to less controversial sin and worldview issues like financial stewardship, one can easily see how with all of us God has been, is, and will likely always be graciously in process with us.

