



## *COMMUNICATING JESUS IN A POSTMODERN CULTURE*

Today as Christians, we must face a hard reality. We live in a culture where our faith is marginalized the moment we announce our spiritual orientation. We must face the reality that our culture has deep embedded beliefs about Christian deficiencies which result from a postmodern misunderstanding of the Christian faith. Consequently, like the Starship Enterprise, there are "defense shields" activated almost instantly when it comes to engaging our postmodern culture in a conversation about Jesus.

Some of these "defense shields" spring forth because of their distaste for Christian doctrines like the exclusivity of Christ, stereotypes involving sexual orientation, and claims such as the Bible represents the absolute truth of God's revelation to humankind. Over the last quarter century, spurred on by a disillusionment with modernity, the reality of globalization, and the the role media plays on popular culture, the nation has become increasingly more postmodern in orientation. Today, our culture perceives the world differently. Relativism has replaced absolute truth, religious pluralism has replaced exclusive religious truth claims, and stories involving personal experience have replaced the meta-narrative. When we share our faith it almost seems like we are speaking a different language.

Furthermore, methods once effective for evangelism have become increasingly ineffective, mainly because our culture is no longer connected to a Christian heritage. Consequently, our approaches to evangelism must change in such a way that we engage in ways where we can have more of an effective dialogue with our culture. So how should we contextually engage our post-modern culture for Jesus in a more effective way? Here are some ideas that must be in place if we are to build bridges with our culture.

### **1. We must not Possess the Heart of Jonah**

#### **Jonah 3:10-4:1-3**

**When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.**

**4 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."**

Jonah remember, did not want God to spare the Great City of Nineveh from God's wrath because of its brutality and wickedness, which is why he disobeyed God and sailed in the other direction. Jonah wanted no part of his assignment; his heart was willfully hardened against that culture.

Later, after God disciplines Jonah, even though he successfully preaches against Nineveh, his heart was still not changed. Here we discover that he would rather die than see the wicked city of Nineveh repent and be forgiven. You see, Jonah was not just mad at Nineveh, he was also mad at God because of the very thing we

should be grateful for in life, His character. He knew God was gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love, and willing to relent from sending disaster if the Ninevites would fess up and repent of their wicked ways.

When it comes to our culture, we must ask ourselves this question: Do I have a heart for my culture like Jonah's? Many Christians do not like some of the practices of their culture and look down on them with Jonah like self-righteous indignation. Many Christians could care less if God spared them because they do not spend much time giving them much thought, much less praying for them. Many have intentionally removed themselves from their cultural context because what is important to God is not really so important to them.

How can this be happening in the Christian sphere where we are supposed to be the salt and light to our contemporary culture? Frankly, the gospel has not really penetrated the hearts of such Christians in a profound and deep way. They have failed to grasp that without the Gospel of grace they are no better off than the Ninevites in God's eyes, no matter what deeds they do in life. In the end, many Christians will never make a cultural impact for Jesus because like Jonah, their hearts are hardened against their respective cultures.

## **2. We must Recognize that Sharing the Gospel is a Process**

### **John 4:39-42**

**39 Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."**

Have you ever studied how Jesus shared his faith? He did so by leaving the walls of the synagogue and connecting with his cultural context. The above passage verifies this reality. For Jesus, evangelism was more than a conversation; it was a process where he invested his time into the living situation of others. If you studied the passage above, you are aware that the Jews purposely avoiding going thru Samaria because they despised that culture. Yet Jesus not only engages this region, but he stays two nights. Ultimately, his one discussion with a woman led to a city hearing about him.

Evangelistic crusades, personal evangelism courses, and tracts, generally aim to lead one to Christ and build on what you already know (or have forgotten) about Christian doctrine. However, as mentioned, in general, the postmodern culture has little familiarity with Christian ideas because many are not affiliated with a Christian heritage. Furthermore, this type of evangelism is more of a one and done technique. In other words, it is more of a one-time attempt to lead people to Jesus. Ultimately, whether it is successful or not, both parties move on and never really establish a relationship. In the end, instead of being like Jesus, Christianity presents itself more like Amway.

Sharing our faith is a process, not a conversation. I recently talked to one of my favorite baristas, only to discover that she had no idea what Christianity was all about in the big picture. She was a brilliant conversationalist and filled with enthusiasm, yet she was stumped on how to engage me in this topic. It is not her fault, she is a beautiful person, but it does serve to remind me that many people are not exactly sure what being a Christian is all about in life. One conversation would never bridge the gap; this would have to be an ongoing process. In the end, our culture has encountered too many salesmen, they are not looking for another conversation to convince them, they are looking to be included in an ongoing dialogue, which revolves around becoming part of their community.

### 3. Communication: We must not Forget to Touch all the Bases

When I was in six grade, I hit my first home run in hardball. As I circled the bases, my teammates were cheering, especially when I jumped into their arms after touching home base. I always wanted to hit a home run and experience what it felt like to be a hero to my peers. Unfortunately, once the other team retrieved the ball, they threw it to the third basemen and appealed to the umpire. My home run was nullified because I forgot to touch third base. In a similar way, Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, New York, mentions that when we share Christ with the postmodern, we often forget to touch all the bases. Here are the bases he mentions that are essential for communication purposes.

**a. Intelligibility** means to perceive clearly, what one believes. We accomplish this primarily by asking questions and listening to what others believe about God and salvation. Therefore, instead of defending our beliefs, we need to process their worldview, which will establish the groundwork for us to engage in spiritual matters.

Several Christians have mentioned they tend not to ask secular folks what they believe because they do not feel like they can confidently engage them on their own perspective. However, what I am advocating here is simply to clarify their beliefs based on their own responses. There is no need to defend your position, nor challenge the views of the postmodern. In the end, we just have to make sure that we are speaking the same language, that we intelligibly understand each other's position.

Many people consider it a failure when you do not preach the gospel in the first setting. They believe that every time you share you must tell people that they are sinners going to hell, that Jesus died on the cross for them, and that they need to repent and believe in him. The problem with this is that until people's minds and worldviews have been prepared, they hear you say "sin" and "grace" and even "God" in terms of their own categories. By going too quickly to this overview you guarantee that they will misunderstand what you are saying.

**b. Credibility** is a way of helping non-Christians understand that the worldview they hold is another personal belief they have embraced. One example is the postmodern notion that all (religious) roads lead to God. "I just can't believe there is only one true religion, one way to God." Notice that is not an argument—it's just an assertion. There is almost no evidence they can muster to support the statement. It is really an emotional expression, but it is so widely held and deeply felt that for many—it automatically means orthodox Christianity cannot be true.

You have to go after them and show people that all their doubts about Christianity are really alternate faith-assertions, which cannot be proven. You have to help them uncover the faith assumptions that skeptics smuggle into their doubts. It will make them begin to think. If you do not do this, people's eyes will just glaze over as you speak. They will tune you out. Nothing you say will sound plausible to them.

Credibility is established when we can show others the very claims they make against us, namely being exclusivists, is the same belief that permeates their thinking in religious matters. We do not do this with scorn or self-righteousness, we present this way humbly by asking them to contrast what they think about Christianity verses what position they advocate. If done well, then the playing field is more even and lays the groundwork for the next step in the discussion.

**c. Plausibility** means you enter deeply into their own hopes, beliefs, aspirations, and longings, and you try to connect with them. This is “contextualization,” which makes people very nervous in many circles. To some, it sounds like giving people what they want to hear. But contextualization is showing people how the lines of their own lives, the hopes of their own hearts, and the struggles of their own cultures will be resolved in Jesus Christ.

Contextualization is the process through which we find answer to these questions. When I talk to someone who insists that no one’s view on spiritual reality (faith) is superior to others, I always respond that that is a view of spiritual reality and a claim that the world would be a better place if others adopted it. Everyone unavoidably has “exclusive” views. To insist no one should make a truth claim is a truth claim.

So the real question is not Do you think you have the truth? (Everybody does.) The real question is: Which set of exclusive truth claims will lead to a humble, peaceful, non-superior attitude toward people with whom you deeply differ? At the center of the Christian truth claim is a man on a cross, dying for his enemies, praying for their forgiveness. Anyone who thinks out the implications of that will be led to love and respect even their opponents.

What am I doing in the above paragraph? I’m taking a major theme of my secular culture—namely, that we live in a pluralistic society of conflict and diversity, and we need resources for living at peace with one another—and I’m arguing that the claim of religious relativism is not a solution, because it is an exclusive claim to superiority masking itself as something else.

Instead I am pointing out that Jesus’ dying on the cross best fulfills the yearning of our pluralistic culture for peace and respect among people of different faiths. This is contextualizing—showing the plausibility of the gospel in terms my culture can understand. We have to do this today.

**d. Intimacy** means leading someone to a personal commitment. The problem with virtually all modern evangelism programs is that they assume listeners come from a Christianized background, and so they very lightly summarize the gospel (often jumping through stages one to three in minutes) and go right to the last stage, stage “intimacy.” But this is no longer sufficient because there is too great of a chasm between the two worldviews. People have too many objections and presuppositions toward the Christian perspective. Trying to lead people to Christ in the scope of one conversation does not address the deeper embedded issues that are present within the culture against Christians.

## **An Intriguing Story**

A good way to conclude this discussion is to ponder what happened in 2009 at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, established by James D. Kennedy, the founder of Evangelism Explosion. After he passed away in 2007, the church hired Tullian Tchividjian, the grandson of Billy Graham as Kennedy’s heir apparent. Both of these men, of course, represented the evangelism methods that were effective in the modernistic culture of the seventies and eighties (Evangelistic crusades and personal evangelism).

However, Tchividjian, recognized that such approaches would not fare well contextually in Ft. Lauderdale’s postmodern culture, which led him to promote a missional approach for his church. Inevitably, his methodology caused quite a rift in the church and many, led by Kennedy’s daughter, passed out petitions for Tchividjian to be ousted as pastor. In the end, the church voted to keep Tchividjian onboard because they recognized the church needed to move forward in the midst of a new and changing culture.

Likewise, we must recognize that just because evangelism methods worked in the past does not mean they will be successful in our postmodern context. In the end, we must make sure that we are tracking and speaking the same language so we can share the gospel in a more productive and effective way.