



Modernity

While the change in our culture from the world of American Christendom to an increasingly secular, pluralistic and diverse culture may seem evident, there is another change in our cultural context that is more subtle but equally powerful. This is the shift from modernity to some weird new thing some people call “post-modernity.” This shift is especially important for Protestant mainline churches for a simple reason. Most of the Protestant mainline, sometimes called “liberal churches,” opened their arms to modernity and the values of the modern era. Theological liberalism was all about making Christianity fit into the modern world. By way of contrast, fundamentalism and much of Catholicism, pretty much circled the wagons against modernity. Theological conservatism was all about protecting tradition and truth against the modern barbarians.

Today, with modernity being on the wane the church, and especially those churches that hooked their wagon to the once rising star of the modern era, need to examine the relationship between Christianity and modernity and sort out what to take along on the next leg of the journey and what to leave behind.

What do I mean by “modernity?” When did modernity begin, and how do we know it has ended or is ending? In such matters dates are guesswork, but the modern era may be dated to 1500 and the beginnings of the Renaissance and Reformation. Some peg it later, to the end of the Thirty Years War (a “religious war”) in Europe in 1648. Marking an ending is even harder. Some say it began with the philosopher Nietzsche in the late 19th century, but most would peg it later, in the last half of the twentieth century, or even for those who like big, round numbers the year 2000.

More important than dates are characteristics and values. I describe modernity in terms of a “Big Five” of hallmark values: reason, optimism, universality, objectivity, and “the grand story.” Modernity held that reason and rational thought are the primary human faculties and the keys to gaining control over life and ridding the world of pernicious superstitions (which is the way many moderns saw religion). By contrast, post-moderns tend to think we’ve drunk too heavily at the wells of reason. They are open to intuition, emotional intelligence, embodied knowledge and mystery. Where moderns wanted their preachers to explain mystery, post-moderns want to experience mystery.

Because moderns thought reason was the key, and that reason in the form of science and technology, promised a great new world moderns tended to be quite optimistic. The vexing and intractable problems of humanity (poverty, racism, ignorance) would be solved, and nature too would be subjected to human control. Post-moderns point out that, yes, we’ve controlled nature, sort of, by building big dams and producing cheap

and plentiful power, but we've also destroyed native cultures and fish stocks. Yes, we've got two or three cars per family and can travel fast and freely at least when we're not stuck in traffic, but we're heating the planet, melting the icecap and raising the seas. Post-moderns are not so sure that salvation is around the corner or that science and technology are our saviors.

For moderns, America was the great melting pot and the United Nations a symbol of our universal humanity. We were to shed our particularities and regional peculiarities, and become modern, universal people. Post-moderns revel in the local and the particular. For them America is less a melting pot than a tapestry or a mosaic. Moderns also were very big on objectivity and the idea that we observers could step outside our own time, social conditioning, and biases to see things "objectively." On this count too, post-moderns are doubters. "Everybody is coming from somewhere," say post-moderns. "What you call 'objective truth,' we call the interests of the powerful and privileged."

Finally, modernity was powered by a big story, a "meta-narrative." Sometimes it was the story of the coming age of prosperity and plenty, other times manifest destiny or the march of democracy. The big story was that through reason, science and technology a new world of progress and prosperity was just around the corner. We were captains of the world, masters of our destiny. Post-moderns tend, again, to be skeptics about this big story. Small stories, particular stories, and different versions of reality appeal to the post-modern mind.

Theologian Stanley Grenz captured the contrast between eras by paying attention to the popular television show Star Trek. Think about it. In the original mid-twentieth century version of Star Trek the hero was Spock, the ideal modern man, completely rational and without emotion. The crew included people of various nationalities working together for the good of humankind. The mission was objective knowledge of space which loomed as "the final frontier."

Fast forward to the late twentieth century and Star Trek: The Next Generation. Spock is gone, his place taken by Data, still perfectly rational but longing to be human, to experience emotion. New to the crew is Counselor Troi, a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the hidden feelings of others. The crew is more diverse than last time around, including species from other parts of the universe. The mission does not rely on human intelligence alone and the mission statement has changed. Once it was "to go where no man has gone before," but now it is "to go where no one has gone before."

And why does this all matter? On one level the answer is easy, there's a huge change in cultural sensibility from modern to post-modern. Many of our churches worked well for moderns, but do not work as well for post-moderns. But it's deeper than that. While modernity was liberating and powerful in many ways, it was also and especially

for Christianity, reductive. Modernity's version of Christianity tended to be highly moral, but not especially spiritual. That is, modern Christianity explained miracle and mystery (away) and proposed moral values and lessons as universal truth. What was missing was spiritual connection and experience, the experience of a sacred, numinous, transcendent Other. No accident then that in the last thirty years, interest in "spirituality" has been huge, and that often and ironically people felt yet church was not the best place to pursue their "spiritual" interests.

While Christendom meant that churches often forgot how to do transformation and formation, that is how to make (or let God make) Christians because we assumed everyone was already Christian, modernity meant that churches actually grew suspicious of spirituality and tended to so emphasize "rational religion" and morality (religion drained of spiritual experience). In these ways, the church responded to and adapted to the cultural context of American Christendom and to the modern world. The point is not so much that this was bad or good. In many ways, I at least think that the Protestant mainline churches did a pretty good job in the modern era and Christendom culture. But the point is this: we don't live there any more. It's a whole new world.

Part Two: Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways do you personally fit and identify with "modernity" and in what ways are you "post-modern?"
2. How about your congregation? How would you assess the balance of head and heart, reason and revelation, morality and spirituality, in your church?
3. Name one or two implications of post-modernity for how you do church?
4. "Modernity tends to be masculine in its orientation, post-modernity more feminine, or inclusive of the feminine aspect of human experience." Does that make sense to you? What does it mean for church and faith in your view?