

# Mission Responses to Postmodernism

By John Corrie

## 1. Introduction

It is generally recognised that the western world is in a time of tremendous cultural change. The ground is shifting beneath our feet and there is great uncertainty about where it is all heading. This presents a great challenge to the mission of the Church: how does it contextualise the gospel in this complex and confusing culture? It is easy to take one of two solutions: either to retreat into the certainties with which we are familiar, to reaffirm the truths and traditions which we value, and to allow the culture to go its own way; or to embrace the culture so positively that we identify with it and allow the gospel, the way we do church, and the way we read scripture, to be shaped by it. We have already seen however that there is always a creative tension between the 'pilgrim principle' and the 'incarnation principle', and we do the gospel no service if we collapse the tension entirely in favour of one or the other. We are always 'in the world but not of the world', always seeking to hold together tradition and transformation. It may well be, as we will see with Bosch, that the way in which we engage the current situation is by embracing the creative tensions and finding ways to make them truly creative of new ways of being Church, new ways of expressing the gospel, and new ways of handling sacred texts that both resonate with and challenge the postmodern culture.

One of the key words used about postmodernism is 'fragmentation'. The metanarrative given to us by the Enlightenment which gave us great optimism about the possibilities of progress and science guided and governed by human reason, is breaking down. Modernity's 'Tower of Babel' is collapsing. There is a process of deconstruction of the stories and texts that have previously given life meaning and direction. Every culture needs such stories which will speak of coherence, stability and identity; but there is great cynicism about whether there is any such framework for truth which can restore any sense of foundation or direction.

Many enlightenment presuppositions have been exposed as inadequate. The limitations of human reason have been recognised: pure objectivity is not possible after all; we cannot have access to all knowledge; scientific knowledge is not neutral and value-free and it does not give us access to pure fact; there is no clear distinction between facts and values, objective and subjective; we cannot have any guarantees, and all our problems are not solvable by rational discourse; and there is no 'grand narrative' behind it all with a universal knowledge which holds it all together; all we have are lots of different stories and plural truths. One of the most famous descriptions of postmodern is by Jean-Francois Lyotard: "incredulity towards metanarratives". Some have recognised that the Enlightenment was too optimistic about human nature, making too many claims upon us:

"The unity of the human being as a creator of culture and as an inhabitant of the world, was destroyed...by seeing the mind as a kind of disembodied spectator, not as part of an involved person; by an excessive individualism, detaching us from each other and the world; by making greater claims for our humanity than it can bear, tearing us from the ground of our being" (Colin Gunton)

This loss of the past certainties combined with uncertainty about the future leads us to live purely for the present and for ourselves. We are not sure who we are or where we belong. We are not sure what it means to have faith, or if it is possible to believe in anything, except perhaps a vague hope that there is something beyond the closed world of cause and effect which the Enlightenment constructed for us. But what we cannot have is conviction, certainty, commitment. There is more certainty about what cannot be believed than what can what can be believed. As Vanhoozer puts it: "The question is whether certain form of postmodernity act as corrosives to the conditions for the possibility of commitment, poisoning the will by depriving it of anything in which to believe ultimately" (Vanhoozer, 2003: 24).

It is important to note that this is a time of transition. There is much of the Enlightenment worldview still around, especially in the world of science and technology. There is a debate about whether our present condition is *postmodern* or *postmodern*. Reason is still required in order to say anything and is sometimes still exalted as the secret of true knowledge. When those such as Richard Dawkins attack Christianity, even though much of his critique is irrational rhetoric and sometimes obsessively dismissive, he has to rely on appeal to 'reason', the certainty of the evolutionary anthropology, and an almost desperate belief in his own human ability to create and sustain meaning. He cannot look to postmodernism to give him any basis for logical argument and an appeal to our own reason. It is possible to see his rhetoric and scientism as the last desperate throws of the Enlightenment worldview, because there are many, though they may not be Christian, who nevertheless stubbornly believe in some spiritual reality and refuse to accept a pure materialism. There is in fact a new recognition that 'faith' is a necessary dimension of lifestyle - not faith in God of course, or any kind of dogma. There are also those postmoderns who see in the strident voices of liberalism and secularism a new fundamentalism which has its own dogmas and certainties.

It is not difficult however to see how easy it is for postmodern people to be cynical about the Christian metanarrative centred in God. The Enlightenment itself did half the job by undermining any hope of 'proving' the existence of God as well as bringing historical and textual criticism to scripture and 'proving' it unreliable. Postmodernism has built on this, and in that sense it is post-modern, coming after modernity as a natural outcome of it. It doesn't believe in the 'proof' bit anymore, but it is willing to go along with the conclusion that there is no God. So postmodernism is not replacing modernity entirely – it often likes to take fragments of it and rework them into a collage of possibilities.

## **2. What is 'Postmodernism'?**

Definitions of postmodernism are of course inimical to its fluidity, evasiveness and provisionality. Here are some sociologists who try to put words to it:

"PM - short-hand for a vague, general, spirit of the times, a codeword for a tremendous sense of change and upheaval" (Elizabeth Wilson)

"PM - no longer produces monumental works...but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, in some new and heightened bricolage" (Jameson)

"PM is modernity without the hopes and dreams that made modernity bearable " (Hebdige)

PM gives us a "perpetual present - without depth, definition or secure identity" (Jameson)

"PM....may mean a work of imagination that defies the difference between painting and sculpture, styles and genres, gallery and the street, art and everything else. It means a life that looks suspiciously like a TV serial, and a docudrama that ignores your worry about setting apart fantasy from what 'really happened'. It means the license to do whatever one may fancy and advice not to take anything you or others do too seriously. It means attention drawn in all directions at once so that it cannot stop on anything for long and nothing gets a really close look. It means a shopping mall overflowing with goods whose major use is the joy of purchasing them; and existence that feels like a life-long commitment to the shopping mall. It means the exhilarating freedom to pursue anything and the mind-boggling uncertainty as to what is worth pursuing and in the name of what one should pursue it" ( Bauman)

Some key words are: image, style, fantasy, mood, space, choice, cool, hip, now, spirit, feelgood, pick'n' mix, whatever...

All cultures can be seen either on the surface or beneath the surface. On the surface are the things we see and experience: language, food, objects etc. Beneath the surface are the values, traditions, ideas etc which the cultures regard as important; and at the heart of the culture is the worldview.

Culture has been defined as:

“The more or less integrated system of ideas, feelings and values, and their associated patters of behaviour and products shares by a group of people who organise and regulate what they think, feel and do” (Hiebert, 1985:30)

and worldview:

“shared framework of ideas held by a particular society concerning how they perceive the world” (Burnett, 1990:13)

Some say that the worldview of postmodernism is still on the drawing board, because there is no shared perception of how the world works, and that's part of the problem. In fact there is no worldview (singular), only worldviews (plural). All institutions which claim to embody a corporate sense of meaning are struggling to survive: the monarchy, political parties, and of course the Church. There is ironically a search for coherence, manifested in organisations fighting for the environment, or against nuclear weapons; or sometime seen in those who fiercely defend tradition and identity by adopting neo-Nationalism. But in relation to meaning, you are on your own and expected to make the best of it:

"The only thing collective society is expected to offer is a set of self-assembly kits for a DIY escape" (Bauman)

On the surface it is very materialistic, consumer society; choice is everything and shopping is the main leisure activity

"Commerce and culture are at last becoming the same thing" (Hewitson)

"The freedom to consume a plurality of goods is equated with freedom itself" (Sontag)

The mantra is now: “Tesco, ergo sum” (I shop therefore I am). The media play an important role in

promoting images as the conveyors of reality, so if we have no direct access to objectivity, we can still have the image. So it is a 'screen culture', which generates a collage of images, all equally 'valid' and all having their 'truth':

"The ruling image in the void of PM is indeed that of the screen" (Hewitson)

Cyberspace creates its own 'reality', and some people are now recreating a life which they lead online which has all the things you do in 'real life', but mediated through the screen. It has been described as the postmodern journey into 'undefined spaciality' (Ward). The screen brings us entertainment of course, and it is a culture threatening to entertain itself literally to death. This links with the emphasis on experience: how it feels is what matters, not whether it is true. Hence the rise and rise of drugs, drink and sexuality, which feed the individual desire for personal sensation which provides existential authenticity.

### **3. The Postmodern Crisis of Knowledge**

All of the above creates an epistemological problem: what is the basis for what we know, and can we actually know anything? How can we know what is 'true'? If we remove the foundations the building collapses. So postmodernism claims:

- There is no universal, certain knowledge – therefore no validity in universal truth claims – therefore we need tolerance to treat all truth claims equally
- All knowledge is contextual, partial, perspectival, particular – therefore any truth can only be truth for me
- What we know is socially constructed – it does not come from outside of ourselves – therefore there is no authoritative 'revelation' of truth
- Truth claims are oppressive; knowledge becomes manipulation of power – therefore dogmatism is not allowed (except postmodern dogmatism)

All this leads to the conclusion that 'foundationalism', an epistemology based on a set of incontestable beliefs and first principles which are universal, objective and rational and which form the foundation of knowledge, is no longer valid.

"Postmodernism has an endemic aversion to questions of truth, believing that the notion of 'truth' is at best illusory and at worst oppressive" (McGrath)

"Capital T truth is dead" (Don Cupitt)

This raises the problem of how we treat texts which are intended to convey 'meaning' and 'truth'. If the author of a text wanted to say something that he believed was 'true' how can we accept it as 'truth'?

Kevin Vanhoozer asks: "Is there a meaning in this text?", because the focus of meaning has shifted from author to text to reader...

"The once stable author has been replaced by the unstable reader. Written texts seem, commonsensically, stable enough. But when we reflect on any effort to understand them by interpreting them, they begin to seem far more puzzling and unstable than we first might have imagined" (Tracy)

"As an institution the author is dead" (Barthes)

Postmodernism sets out to 'deconstruct texts' by first denying the text any objective meaning and stripping it of its ideological pretensions and philosophical subtexts: this works with what is called the 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. This suspects that all universal frameworks of meaning are an authoritarian imposition. Deconstruction attempts to free language from any constraints of philosophical thought behind it: all attempts to find meaning are useless and truth is totally relative. Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984) said that the notion of 'truth' serves the interests of the powerful, and language is used to control relationships. The text and the reader need to be set free of ideological pretensions and subtexts to create their own meaning. According to Foucault through this process writing has:

"freed itself from...the confines of its interiority and become identified with its own unfolded exteriority" (Foucault)

Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004) challenged the assumption that language communicates anything. He used the term 'logocentrism' to describe reasoning based on the 'myth' of rationality which cannot provide any basis for the quest for understanding. Deconstruction for him was a 'decentering' process, unmasking the centre, and removing any pretence at meaning, coherence and 'presence' from a text. It used to be assumed that what was present in the text was a real 'given' which existed prior to language and to which language refers. The claim was to be able to reflect and to represent reality in such a way as to mirror exactly the way things are. Derrida attacks this assumed convergence between reality and our description of it. There is no actual 'presence' of meaning in a text, because the symbols have lost any identity with their origins and any connection with the mind of the author. Indeed what is claimed to be present is really absent, and the 'given' is merely a construction of human origin. Deconstruction therefore dismantles the 'given' and forces us to face up to the ways in which we construct language to gain control or to legitimate merely local or personal concerns.

So any text can release meanings which its author did not necessarily intend or could not have intended. It cannot be allowed to impose its meanings. In any case these meanings cannot be circumscribed by the actual words used. All interpretations are therefore equally valid, or equally meaningless! The inconsistency of deconstruction is exposed of course as soon as it tries to say something, because it is saying that it is not possible to say anything which anyone need to take seriously. So why take the deconstructionists seriously??

So how do we make 'sense' of a text? Is meaning created by ourselves? This is the so-called the Reader-Response Approach. Meaning is created at the moment of response to the text. Meaning is thus created in the mind of the reader. The response of the reader unites him or her with the text in a moment of subjective understanding.. The assumption is that there is no independent meaning and truth is totally relative:

"What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically...truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are: metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins" (Nietzsch)

#### **4. Responses to the problem**

There are broadly three possible approaches to this problem. The first can be described as *naïve realism*. This states that it is possible to have direct correspondence between the external world and our knowledge of it as a knowing subject. Things can be known as they really are, and we can know when we are wrong. It is realism because we can have a real knowledge. But it is naïve in that it does not take into consideration the complications of circumstance and perspective which tend to distort our perception of reality, and make it difficult to have direct correspondence.

At the other extreme are the *radical perspectivalists*, who say that our perspective is all there is, and there is no hope of meaningful contact with reality outside of ourselves. All we can do is construct our own universe and give it our own reality. *Perspectival realists (or critical realists)* seek a middle way by saying that perspective does affect how we see and hear, but that doesn't rule out the possibility of saying something which corresponds with reality. Our knowledge may be partial but can be true. Truth emerges from a combination of what is there, how I perceive it, and how I speak about it.

There are several Christian approaches which have taken this last route. I will look at four of them:

#### **4.1 Walter Brueggemann - Perspectivalism with Imagination (Brueggemann, 1993, and 1997)**

Brueggemann begins from the assertion that we must abandon the traditional assumption that there is a privileged or dominating interpretation of any text. He regards this as triumphalist and arrogant. He accepts that texts have the ability to speak differently to different contexts: they have a 'plurivocal' character which does not allow us to impose a single meaning on them. This approach rejects conformity in favour of conversation, an open-ended 'playfulness', which is creative and imaginative.

The reason why this approach is to be preferred is precisely because Brueggemann finds the text itself full of ambiguities and even contradictions. We find that uncomfortable so we block the text by imposing an interpretation and closing off the discussion. Interpretation is now local and provisional:

"My own angle on interpretation is that we read together a testimony to the Elusive One who is endlessly rendered and re-rendered, around whom has gathered a rich inheritance of testimony, consisting in image, metaphor, and narrative - acts of imaginative construal that admit of no single reading but that generate many possible futures" (Brueggemann, 1997:8)

Newbigin has said in relation to science that there is a role for intuition and creative imagination in the search for truth. Brueggemann picks up this theme in his book *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. Moving away, like Newbigin, from any attempt to establish certitude which is objective and detached, he proposes that all knowing is 'imaginative construal':

"By imagination I mean very simply the human capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens. More succinctly, imagination as the quintessential human act is a valid way of knowing".(Brueggemann, 1993:13)

In the postmodern situation all claims to reality and truth are now 'under negotiation'. Reality has an on-going, open-ended truth which requires creative imagination to interpret. As Christians we have to accept that and not fight it. But the world can be imagined differently and that can lead to the world being different. The gospel invites people to this radical change as a counter-imagination of a new perspective.

Newbigin makes the point that scientific knowledge begins with the imagination as it envisions something as possible which has never been tried before. This leap of imagination is not entirely a leap of faith into the dark, since it is building on knowledge which is already seen as reliable. We are building upon the text of scripture, but we can only come to 'know' the dimensions of its truth as we set it free and allow it to give us new visions of what is possible.

Brueggemann thinks that the preaching of the church makes too many concessions to an epistemology that has dominated for too long, which is preoccupied with the search for certitudes and absolutes - or has been up to the postmodern period. Most middle aged and older people who come to church are still 'modern' in their thinking, and 'stuck' in Enlightenment objectivist categories. But they also bring with them many of the assumptions of the age - consumerism, self-interest etc. If all these assumptions are to be challenged by the gospel, so that a genuinely alternative society can be modelled in the Church, we must learn to read the scriptures afresh so that its proposed world is allowed to confront our presumed world, in which we think we know what the gospel is about. The purpose is transformation, first of ourselves and then of the world, but that will only happen if the text is set free and allowed to fund our imagination and that of the world around us.

This will be uncomfortable for some because it will involve recognising the ambiguity and complexity of the biblical text, and setting it free from the constraints of religious orthodoxy, critical rationality and moral certitudes. The text does not confirm us in our presuppositions, it draws us into what Brueggemann calls an 'enormous epistemological displacement' in the interests of a perspective which is truly in sympathy with postmodern thinking and therefore more likely to find fertile ground.

We may want to ask, what happens to the authority of the text in this approach? Is 'what God is saying' merely a product of our imagination? Or is imagination just one of the tools we bring to our reading of the text? This question about authority is always under the surface of this discussion. On what basis do we establish authority for the truth that we claim to know? Is it something to do with the authority of the tradition in which our thinking and knowing takes place?

#### **4.2 Tom Wright - Critical Realism (Wright, 1992)**

Bishop Tom Wright is a New Testament scholar who has recognised the importance of issues of epistemology in approaching interpretation of the text. He concludes that all the problems that we encounter in reading texts, understanding their history and formulating theology based upon them, all come back to the problem of knowledge itself. Wright's preference is for the approach adopted by several other interpreters known as 'critical realism'.

Wright assumes that all knowledge takes place within interpretative frameworks, which can be seen as constituting an integral element of the worldviews through which all of us view reality. Essential to a worldview is a set of 'stories' of how reality works, and these stories provide the framework through which we experience the world. Our knowledge therefore of the world is mediated through stories which are told within a larger, overarching story within which we order the whole of our lives. The stories act as metaphors for reality, not putting us directly in touch with 'objective' reality, but nevertheless being a true reflection of it. They recognise that we cannot have direct contact with reality except through representations of it in metaphors. But stories need not be subjectivist either, since they are formulated by communities and traditions beyond ourselves. This means that the use of stories can take us beyond the subject-object dichotomy and enable us to speak truly about the world without the constraint of

having to 'prove' what we know in a positivist way.

Stories can be set up as hypotheses of how the world works and then tested by seeing how they fit with the stories already acknowledged as useful. They can challenge worldviews with different stories, so that it becomes possible to see how worldviews can be modified, or even completely changed. This is how Jesus used the parables, with their powerful subversive effect, turning upside down the assumptions of their hearers.

So critical realism uses stories to convey truth; it accepts that we cannot have direct access to reality, but we can speak truthfully. It invites us to commit ourselves in faith, always prepared to be critical of our position - we may have got it wrong!

“From the point of view of a Christian critical realism, we must say that story and metaphor, including myth, are ways in which....words in relation to the creator and redeemer God can be truly spoken. One must speak of provisionality and partial insight, of truth to which one is totally committed but which can only be stated provisionally” (Wright)

### **4.3 Middleton and Walsh - Epistemological Stewardship (Middleton and Walsh, 1995)**

Middleton and Walsh set out to be perspectival realists. They see this as the only way to help postmodern society to move from disorientation to reorientation towards a renewed vision which gives genuine hope. This will come through corporate interpretation. Corporate interpretation will mean that we need to listen to one another across our cultural boundaries as we bring our own perspectives to the biblical text. Theologies from other contexts will enrich our own understanding of the text and help us to see it from a different angle.

The responsibility of helping to forge a new vision for postmodern society rests with the Church. We cannot do it as individuals. This means that we need to focus on corporate hermeneutics as we read the biblical story, and how we, as a community of the people of God, can indwell that story faithfully. By so doing we should be able to present a 'living, covenantal alternative' which will make a genuine contribution to the constructing of a new worldview. The story of redemption is not closed, it is open to the future, which consists of a final Act which we only have sketched in scripture. Many texts remain unresolved, and they invite us to participate in their resolution. Like Brueggemann they are prepared to say that here is an openness to the texts which draws us into creative involvement in their fulfilment.

But the corporateness of interpretation must include the biblical characters, who were themselves struggling to interpret what God was doing in their own context. Middleton and Walsh are saying that our bible study therefore should listen to that struggle and take on board the honesty with which they present their tensions. Our aim is not to reproduce the text slavishly, or their way of responding, but to 'discern the thrust of the entire metanarrative', and by so doing be in a position to live out the story in our own context in a way that is both creative and faithful to the original; in other words, by 'faithful improvisation'.

It is much better to recognise that life is full of conflicts, most of which remain unresolved, and that these conflicts are mirrored in scripture. People today need to see that scripture is grappling with real issues, which are also their issues, and this will draw them into the biblical story because they will see that it

identifies with 'where they are at'. Until they do that they will not be able to see how the cross and resurrection hold forth the possibility of resolution, and how their lives can be part of the story of redemption. In this way the bible will be no longer a closed book to them; not a set of rules, nor a collection of timeless truths (though it contains both these things), but essentially the script of a drama in which they can be involved. This will require them to get to know the Author, of course, so it draws them into relationship with him, which is the purpose of the gospel.

So what we are offering people is not a naive certainty, nor a blind acceptance of truth, nor a fundamentalist literal interpretation of every single text, nor a single meaning which we impose on the text to serve our own interests. We offer people an opportunity to discover truth for themselves through a faith commitment which gives them a personal involvement in God's story. To know anything we have to begin with a faith commitment. That faith commitment to truth will need to be tested, and must be prepared to be questioned: faith is not the absence of doubt.

#### **4.4 Kevin Vanhoozer – Epistemology of the Cross (Kirk and Vanhoozer, 1999)**

Vanhoozer is also a perspectival realist. His assertion is that rationality is not (mainly) about what we know but about wisdom, which is about *living* the truth.

“Theology in a postmodern context must re-orientate itself to wisdom rather than to knowledge. Wisdom, I believe, is the means of integrating what modernity and postmodernity alike have torn asunder: metaphysics and morals, theory and practice, fact and value. Wisdom is a matter of knowing certain things but also of making one’s knowledge fruitful” (Vanhoozer)

We can affirm Augustine’s dictum: ‘I believe in order to understand’, but it is not enough merely to understand, because we have to be prepared to live the truth, and even to die for it! We need to be prepared to bear testimony to the way in which the Christian version of reality ‘makes sense’ in experience: which does not ‘prove’ the existence of God, but it does show the wisdom of God. At the same time we need to demonstrate the folly of all the alternatives! Vanhoozer accepts that it is impossible to return to propositional theology; it is rather to be seen as a form of reflection known as ‘theodrama’ which enters into the story of God’s revelation in order to extract from it a ‘shape for life’ that is governed by wisdom.

This approach makes the cross the endurance test of truth: a Christian is a ‘truth-teller, a truth-doer and a truth-sufferer’. It is a version of what Vanhoozer calls ‘Virtue epistemology’: knowledge gained with humility but conveyed with passion and conviction, in the spirit of Luther: “Here I Stand” – and I am willing to face the consequences!

### **5. The Response of the Church**

#### **5.1 Church as the ‘Hermeneutic of the Gospel’ (Newbigin)**

We come back to Newbigin’s focus on the Church, since it is the Church as a community of the Kingdom which provides the focal point of convergence for hermeneutics, epistemology and mission. The Church is the hermeneutic community within which the story of God’s purposes is being interpreted and lived; it is where God can be known; and as a church it must also be a community structured for mission.

“The Church is the community of believers, gathered by divine election, calling, new birth, and conversion, which lives in communion with the Triune God, is granted the forgiveness of sins, and is sent to serve the world in solidarity with all mankind” (Bosch)

“Jesus did not write a book but formed a community. This community has at its heart the remembering and rehearsing of his words and deeds” (Newbigin)

There is a convergence of views about the importance of the Church being a contextual, incarnational, flexible and holistic community. It must be humble in the way in which it holds its convictions and proclaims its story, it must focus on witness rather than proclamation: it must demonstrate truth rather than trying to prove it intellectually; it must be open and honest about its struggles, and it must incorporate the complexity and agony of suffering in its view of God’s relation with the world. It must sit loose to institutional structures:

“For a movement to retain its cutting edge, it is important to hold nothing sacred except its original calling. Institutions, programmes and structures are only means; we must be ready to discard them once they have outlived their usefulness” (Maggay)

The Model must be Church as Community of the Kingdom, which demonstrates the truth that the gospel results in an alternative way of living that works.

“Once we give up on the notion of objective truth, we are free to admit that our reliance on this prop in the past was a form of denial: denial of our calling as the Church. Too often appeals to the objective truth of the gospel have served as a means for the Church to evade its responsibility to live faithfully in the world. What our world is waiting for, and what the Church seems reluctant to offer, is not more incessant talk about objective truth, but an embodied witness that clearly demonstrates why anyone should care about any of this in the first place” (Kenneson)

## **5.2 Emerging Church**

“The emerging church is being willing to take the red pill, going down the rabbit hole, and enjoying the ride” (Karen Ward)

That may not be your view of church, but many now say that if we are going to contextualise the Church effectively in a postmodern context we need to think outside the box, being willing to take risks, being creative and innovative in forms of worship, being flexible, responsive, relational and real, in ways we have not been under the influence of modernity. If current church practices are indeed culturally accommodating to a society that no longer exists, then for sure we need to change them. But precisely what it is that needs to change is not often clear. We do not want to be post-modern, or post-evangelical, or post-anything else, simply for the sake of it; nor do we want to lose touch with the essence of the Church as a worshipping community of the Body of Christ in all its breadth and diversity. If the church is becoming more of a ‘network’ as a new form of ‘community’, then we have to evaluate what is gained and what is lost by such a transition. Certainly ‘community’ is a key word in the debate, as we have already identified with Newbigin; but it is also something to do with ‘spirituality’, and the recognition that current ways of being church do not engage postmodern people at the level where personhood, creativity, and experience become important dimensions of authenticity. But once again we find the context bringing its agenda to how we think about church and mission and forcing us to rethink our

categories and modes of engagement. To be sure we cannot stand still; but I suspect that just when we think we are engaging with the new cultural situation, everything will have moved on again and once again the church will be left trying to catch up. But if we have developed modes of being and action which are more flexible, then at least we will be in a better position to respond.

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