

## SIN OF THE CENTURY, PART 2: HELPING OTHERS

Philippians 2:1-8, Selected (NASB)

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The lostness of mankind has taken a turn for the worse. In the pre-modern period of Western culture people saw the entire universe as the spaceship of God. Everyone and everything was on it. Because they were all inside the ship--I'm making a generalization--almost everyone thought of life in God's terms. Many people who did not know God went to church, said prayers, and even read the Bible--because there was a consensus that that was what the universe was about. The destiny of every person was reckoned on God's terms. Good was good and bad was bad because God said so. This held true for non-Western premodern cultures as well which would simply attribute all reality to a different god or set of gods.

If premodern society was traveling inside the spaceship of God's truth, modern society has been taking a space walk on a tether. Most modern people decided not to travel inside the spaceship of God's truth. They saw it as too confining, so they donned a spacesuit and headed out the airlock on a permanent EVA, or Extra-Vehicular Activity. For the modern person goodness and truth were what mankind said they were. But notice that he or she was still on the tether. God's reality and definitions were still in view. The modern person knew where the spaceship of God was and was still connected to it though choosing to operate outside of it. Anytime he wanted, the modern person could have reeled in the tether, opened the hatch, and gotten back into the ship of God. Having God in view kept modern culture from disintegrating as fast as it would have otherwise, but most people have not gotten back into the ship.

Now Western culture has made a transition to a postmodern world view. After years of saying that God is not the fundamental reality of the universe people have come to take God's absence for granted. Why bother keeping him in view at all? The postmodern person is neither inside the spaceship of God's truth nor on a tether to it. He or she is floating alone in the vacuum of space, spinning slowly end over end with no sense of orientation whatever. There is no retreat from this condition because external definitions of goodness and truth simply do not exist. He does not know where the ship of God is, and if he should chance to see it while spinning in zero gravity he would not recognize it. Partly by cultural conditioning and partly by sinful choice, the postmodern person has no reference for reality left except the self.

Whereas the modern person asserted the self over God but kept God in view, the post-modern person is totally stripped of any sense of divine reality. Life has become a matter of making every decision based upon internal considerations. For example, does God exist and what is he or she like? A vote is taken inside each spacesuit, and the tally is inevitable: one vote for my way, no other votes cast. What is good? A vote is taken inside each spacesuit, and the tally is always one to zero. What is truth? Same result. Ultimately, the postmodern person is the final word on everything, except that he can extend his final word to no one outside himself. The universe has imploded upon the self disastrously. This is the sin of the current century, and the church has no choice but to learn how to minister the grace and truth of Jesus Christ in this environment.

I know that in popular speech many people have come to take the word “modern” as the equivalent of “contemporary.” While that is the dictionary definition, historians say that “modern” refers to that historical period where God was shoved out of the center of Western culture and mankind was enthroned as the measure of all things. It began in the so-called Enlightenment and became part of life years later as it was enshrined by industrialization and technology. But the modern period is nearly over for the West. The current contemporary period is postmodern in thought and practice--no God, no hope, no truth, no authority, and no meaning in life.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SIN OF THE CENTURY

You can see by my spaceship illustration that helping postmodern people find redemption in Christ cannot be done by expecting them to find their own way back to God. And while not everyone is as bad off as I have described, most have nothing by which to navigate. We will have to go and get them. But before we set off on that quest, we need to clarify the nature of the extreme form of lostness common in our postmodern period. We won't be able to help them unless we are prepared to minister through the hindrances of the sin of the century.

Dr. Elaine Storkey lectured on seven key characteristics of the postmodern person at the C. S. Lewis Summer Institute at Oxford University in 2002. These are not original to her, and while entire books have been written on each one of them, a summary overview can be a tremendous help in planning our ministry in this century.

The first characteristic, which we discussed in part one of this study, is the loss of the big story which explains life. The postmodern accepts neither the true Big Story of the Biblical God nor any of the false substitutes provided by religion or philosophy. As a consequence, life must be lived without truth, without authority, and without meaning. There is no final word on anything! I am reminded of small clips I have seen of the adult television cartoon called *The Simpsons*. The entire program is based on a postmodern world view. Everything and everyone comes up for review and is found wanting--politics, religion, medicine, career, family, love, recreation. The argument is made that the show is harmless because everything is lambasted equally. And that is precisely why it is so terrible! In reality, not everything is equally unworthy. It is not true that nothing really matters. And in the real world none of us has the right to render judgment on everything. This seemingly harmless program is an evangelistic tract for a postmodern view of reality.

The second characteristic is a shift from communication by words to images. This should have been no surprise to us when we all put down our books back in the nineteen fifties and chose instead to watch an average of twenty-four hours of television a week. Nothing complicated can be expressed on TV because that would not entertain, and so instead of refined ideas of truth with nuanced realities we are presented with only that version of truth which entertains and which can be transmitted through images. Is it really true that seeing elephants on TV conveys a truer knowledge than studying them through extensive reading? No, it is just a different perspective, and vastly diminished. And most television is done simply to amuse, with the explicit purpose of avoiding any communication of truth because that would make viewers uncomfortable. The internet functions in a similar. Notice that we do not usually say that we are reading web pages but looking at them.

The dominance of the image over the word has spread to all forms of advertising, print media,

film, video games, and the biggest one of all, the internet. By this means intuition has triumphed over logic, image over substance, and emotion over rational communication. In the past, political candidates spoke for hours explaining their views on issues. Now, people make snap voting judgments based on appearance and brief, manipulative slogans. Have you noticed that there have been no chubby, bald presidents elected since television took over our view of reality? And imagine what power is held by those who get to choose and shape the images which comprise our view of reality. The replacement of words with images represents a huge challenge to ministry because the Bible is God's primary means of communicating truth. Jesus said: **"...The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life"** (John 6:63b). There is no substitute for these words. In the past the attempt to replace words with images in the church produced catastrophic results because images can be invested with many meanings.

Thirdly, the sin of the century causes people to live in a kind of perpetual present, which is the root meaning of the word "secular". We are disconnected from our roots. This is a critical spiritual loss because if people do not know that the first fact of history is that God created the earth they have no reason to do what is right. History for postmoderns has become a resource to be plundered and used for influencing people. For example, how many of you have heard negative things about the Victorian era in the West? That's because the following slogan has been used to promote gender feminism, free sex, pornography, and cohabitation: "You don't want to be Victorian!" But few of us actually know anything about the Victorian era. History is, in fact, the story of God and redemption.

Fourth, the sin of the century leads to a kind of playfulness with things by taking them out of context. I recently heard a violinist who combines traditional Irish folk music with blues, Latin rhythms, and African music. While this is an innocent example, other cases become damaging when they arise from the belief that there is no context which has any authority to guide behavior. Fifthly, the sin of the century has led to a preference for disembodied communication through computers and telephones. We end up communicating with our idea of the other person rather than the real person. We also have a tendency to use the opportunity to present an image of ourselves rather than the true self. This is a powerfully seductive idea.

Sixthly, the sin of the century results in extreme relativism with regard to truth. The majority of people today say they do not believe in any such thing as absolute truth or absolute morality. The phrases most used are the oxymorons "my truth" and "your morality." Once logic itself has been flushed down the maelstrom of relativism, one cannot even point out that the sentence "There is no absolute truth" contains its own refutation. It is a statement of an absolute truth and so refutes itself! But postmoderns just shrug and say: "Whatever." By contrast, Jesus said, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"** (John 14:6). How do we present the absolute truth and morality of an absolute God to such people?

In this environment people put opposites together. Singer Madonna sells herself as the virgin strumpet. I have seen articles on "born-again" strippers. And the granddaddy confusion of opposites is seen in those churches which purport to be all about God and are now being sold as all about you! It cannot be both. This heedless combining of contradictory things has created a huge playing field for sin. Jesus said to love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37), while postmodernism argues that you can be a gambling, stripping, porno-using, lying, "born-again" Christian. Sanctification has never had a more dangerous enemy than the sin of the century.

Seventh and finally, postmodernism has left people with ambiguity about the meaning of personhood. The pro-abortion advocates exploited this crack in Western culture and sailed an aircraft carrier through it. They said: "That thing in the woman's body is not a person, it's just a blob of tissue. It's not a baby, it is just the 'products of conception.'" And because the West is confused about the definition and meaning of personhood these flimsy arguments have prevailed. Dr. Storkey listed many refuges people take when they do not know that they are created in God's image to love and worship him: "I am what I do; I am what I own or what I buy; I am what other people think of me; I am my sexuality; I am what I make of myself; I am the image I choose; I am of no real significance." These are the grim projects which postmodern people undertake to give meaning to life. Without Christ, their situation is hopeless.

## HELPING OTHERS OVERCOME THE SIN OF THE CENTURY

I have belabored this mammoth introduction because we cannot help anyone with the sin of the century unless we understand it. In Part 1 of this study I pointed out that we also cannot help anyone else until we have recognized the corrosive effects of the sin of the century in our own lives and repented of them. With these two issues addressed, we are ready to re-examine the work of Christ to see what we should do to help postmodern people believe in him. The second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians begins with one of the most challenging and unarguable set of commands ever given to believers: **"Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others"** (Philippians 2:1-4).

The first verse tells us that we have a huge warehouse of resources upon which to draw for ministry. They sound like a bunch of "maybes" but according to the grammar of the original Greek they are concrete realities. We have encouragement or upbuilding in Christ. We have the comfort of Christ's bulletproof love for us. We have fellowship both in the Spirit and with the Spirit. We have affection, mercy, tenderness, and sympathy for others because Christ put them in our hearts. With these resources we can do the first step of ministry which is to become the thing for which postmodern people are looking. They will usually not accept a mere explanation. They have to see it for themselves.

When we are the true church postmoderns will experience a people of one mind, filled with love, united in spirit, and working together for the same thing: the kingdom of God. They will see people acting unselfishly and looking out for one another. Do you understand how radical this is? Postmodern culture has imploded upon the self and so people serve the self without compunction. When they see Christians serving others out of love with the resources of Christ it stands out like, oh, say **"a city set on a hill"** (Matthew 5:14) shining out in the black of night to show the way home. Jesus said this is how we will authenticate ourselves in every age: **"By this all...will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"** (John 13:35). Jesus said that not only do we have to tell the answer, we have to be the answer."

What will it take for us to be the answer? The most monumental change of attitude is required: **"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the**

**form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”** (Philippians 2:5-8). God demands a voluntary change of focus in our lives from ourselves to others. It is not optional, but we must choose it ourselves as Christ did. The logic is devastatingly simple. Christ chose to go all the way down to save us because that was the only way it could be done. He commands us to adopt the same attitude because that is the only way others can be saved. If God himself was willing to leave the glories of heaven to become like us, muck around with the sinners, and get killed so that we might be saved, who are we to refuse to do the same?

God chose to use the only means of communication that would work. He had to become like us. He could not have become a sheep bleating out the gospel or a bee buzzing it out. He became like us, and we are going to have to do the same to communicate Christ to imploded, isolated, postmodern people who are spinning through the vacuum of space with no way home. We have to enter their world and connect with them there because that’s where they live! That’s what Jesus Christ did for us.

We are going to have to approach them relationally, presenting Christ directly to their experience by serving them, through pictures, emotion, and even intuition because their logic function is damaged. We are going to have to minor in explanation evangelism and major in servant evangelism. Yes, they need to learn the words and logic of Christ which are spirit and are life, but we are the book they need to read first. We become, as Paul wrote, **“a letter of Christ...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts”** (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Once they read us, and receive Christ, then we can begin to teach them to value truth over experience, to learn of God through his holy word, and to become the answer for someone else. The work of ministry to postmoderns is very much like reconstructive surgery because their persons have been disfigured by the sin of the century. If this seems like a lot of work just to get someone to heaven, it is nevertheless a work done by Christ for us and commanded by him: **“...Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others”** (Philippians 2:4).

So the two imperatives for reaching people in the postmodern era are first, that we must become the answer for which they seek by modeling selfless love in the church. We are going to have to admit that it has been much easier to focus on "doing church" than loving people. For example, the Bible says to "greet one another with a holy kiss," feed, clothe, and house the needy among us, rebuke and restore the wayward, lift the weary, comfort the grieving, minister to the sick, and visit those in prison. We already do these things, but we need to make sure that they grow in their importance.

Secondly, we have to choose to be with the postmodern people of our time and use communication methods which work for them. The Biblical gift of hospitality will go a long way to achieving these things. I once heard this question addressed by Bruce Herman, Lothlórien Distinguished Chair in the Fine Arts at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. He was taking questions after a lecture on the Christian practice of art and someone asked: "What are we supposed to do with all of these crazy artists who lambast Christianity at every opportunity and who represent depraved ideas in their art?" Bruce paused for a moment and answered: "Invite them to dinner and talk to them." Once we understand the necessity for doing these things the only thing standing in the way of ministry to postmoderns is our own selfishness. And Christ provides the cure for that--if we will take it.