

A NEW NORMAL?


Bart Woodhouse

DR. BART WOODHOUSE SHARES SOME THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL IN THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF OUR POST PANDEMIC CULTURE.

As I watch the news each night and read through the social media feed of my own echo chamber, the Holy Spirit causes me to wonder whether we are at a critical moment of renewal within the church, despite evidence to the contrary. The news is typically depressing, pandemic fatigue has certainly set in, and its efforts, along with others, at sharing good news are often well meaning, but unsatisfying and ring hollow in the face of life's present raw experience. I then wonder whether the pandemic has helped to uncover an ancient wound; a wound that 'Emmerdale'; repeats of 'Love Actually'; government reforms; sex; eating a whole bag of 'Percy Pigs'; a holiday to Disney Land, and even (dare I say it) Captain Tom, cannot heal or even acknowledge. As the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us 'He has also set eternity in the human heart' (Ecclesiastes 3:11), and only the eternal love and person of God can ever satisfy that need in the human heart.

Our culture has become extremely advanced, primarily in the art of distraction and consumption, which appears to be fuelling an insecure clamour for meaning in ever more polarised ideological and political enclaves. I sense that the pandemic may have opened a wider gap in the western cultural curtain revealing the frail 'postmodern wizard', frantically maintaining his smoke and mirrors.

I know the wound that was in my life was fundamentally a question of sin, shame, and identity, which worked themselves out as a polluting brokenness inside. Along with the inability to look up with true confidence, and my shifting sense of 'self' being continually obscured by competing internal and external voices, none of which ever provided the solid ground that I craved. I believe this same ancient wound persists in a litany of different expressions within the lives of those around us. It is to

A hand in a dark suit sleeve holds a circular mirror over a body of water. The mirror reflects the blue water and sky, creating a circular frame of the scene. The background is a vast, calm body of water under a pale sky.

these that the Christ-centred gospel needs to be shared: to be free of sin and shame, and most wonderfully to begin the eternal adventure of being God's cherished, adopted, chosen child. I am not convinced, post pandemic, that we need to spend too much effort on trying to widen the gap in the cultural curtain to expose the frailty of the wizard. Society seems perfectly able to expose its own myths, proclaiming our 'mortality' on the billboard of Covid, perpetuating warring ideologues, and fuelling the fast-fashion nature of 'identities', to mention just a few. However, as I explore a bit more below, we do need to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), living and demonstrating the truth of Christ, his cross, and the surrendered way to victory and security. Indeed, being a people of a positive message that is confident, engaging, and self-giving first and foremost. Thus, avoiding being distracted by the noise of our culture to the degree we forget to be the light, indeed a light that reveals the darkness. Put another way, there is a need to resist pointing out the ills of society for its own sake, and instead reveal the light of Christ and allow the shadows to speak for themselves. Indeed, the ancient wound won't heal without the sting of the salty cleansing gospel, the truth that defies a 'post-truth' pharmakon, that in Christ there is freedom, a truth that reveals both harsh realities about ourselves and the world and yet affirms us as loved and rooted on solid ground (Galatians 5:1). We need to rediscover a confidence and capacity to speak to the issues of sin, shame, and identity that emanates from a harmony with the Holy Spirit, already at work before us, and the grace of Christ available by the means of two crosses, his victory on calvary and mine on my knees in surrendered repentance.

I learnt to swim properly a little later in life as a teenager, having spent many years growing up having fun in the pool but never feeling confident when out in the deep end. After many hours of practice, I finally mastered the art of swimming, which allowed me access to the deep water where I no longer needed the comforting presence of the badly tiled pool floor or the hair littered side rail. I was free from the restrictive need to hold on to something, I no longer needed a fixed presence



with all its offensive accretions. But, as I discovered, swimming in the deep end gets tiring, and at that point I would look for the place of rest, and the side of the pool with all of its 'public facility' charm, became my place of rescue as I caught my breath.

I often use this rather flimsy analogy to describe something of the 'postmodern' shift that has been underway for the best part of sixty years. There is a continuing shift away from the hard and defining 'truths' into the more free and limitless water of personal, validating, and contextualizing narratives, or, 'my truths'. This has given prominence to such moral ideals as authenticity and the demand for a reciprocated accommodation of my self-made claims. In short it plays a significant role in generating a sense of identity, where the question of 'who am I?' is allowed to echo in its own chamber. It is the postmodern framing of identity that I want to spend a moment looking into, as I feel it may be a crucial evangelistic point of engagement as we reveal the light of Christ.

Let me explain a little about authenticity, at least as I understand it. It expresses an increasingly cherished cultural moral value that has a slightly different take on reality from what it might have meant several years ago. Authenticity in this context simply encapsulates the idea of being, of becoming, truly one's self, unmediated and unhindered by controlling influences, norms, or historic orthodox beliefs. Hence, to be 'authentically myself', is to be free, is to be true to my own story, my own, meaningful narrative, empowered to become the ground of my own being - or put another way - I am as I imagine myself to be; I create and sustain my own sense of identity. Interestingly, the use of imagination is always employed in this endeavour as authenticity, which, ironically, never escapes the need to be an ongoing creative act (Genesis 11:4). Returning to my analogy, here the postmodern 'self' pushes away from the side of the pool, confident and free, but continually caught-up in the work of maintaining the 'self'. This demanding work is unnoticed at first, but as each simulacrum of the 'self' is realised as just that, the work becomes noticeable and opens the door to a growing

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anxiety. Indeed, this moral value of authenticity is collectively maintained and fostered, so helping keep the growing anxiety at bay, by the further moral demand that every authentic 'self' be accommodated reciprocally within the given community. Again, more simply put, 'I'll value your truth and you value mine'.

The authentic 'self' is self-generated, in a not too dissimilar fashion, like one engaging with a puppet on one's own hand as if it is truly one's self. This is the strange moment that requires a certain madness, which in turn grows to become a nagging anxiety, producing a glance to see where the proverbial pool edge is. But, to avoid surrendering to a higher imagination of ourselves and resisting giving ourselves over to be re-created and informed by an untiringly creative God of love, is to insist on our prideful 'self-creation' (Proverbs 21:2). However, this self-made entity ultimately, has few resources to draw from in our secular, 'cheap truth', and consumerist milieu. As Charles Taylor explores in thorough detail in 'A Secular Age'; the secular self (or as Taylor would describe it, the 'buffered self') may become increasingly aware of the limited resources available in a purely material sense, for constructing a meaningful, satisfying, and deep understanding of the self and the world. I think Jesus said something on this involving sand, rock, and a storm (Matthew 7:24-27)? Augustine of Hippo writes, in his Confessions: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you'.

The question raises its head: do we possess the highest imagination of our own identity? Is the temptation to believe this, the very thing that disconnects us from the divine, and prevents repentance as metanoia; transformation of heart and mind? Is authenticity in this context simply a form of pride, not dissimilar to that expressed in the third chapter of Genesis? I believe that questions of identity and authenticity are of paramount importance, as it is increasingly the battle ground of the soul, one with which we need to learn how to engage.

There is little space in this postmodern and politically correct utopian dream for criticism or challenge: that would be to risk offence, and so the 'self' generating game continues. I'm reminded here of Søren Kierkegaard's words that 'The possibility of offence is the dialectical element in all that is Christian. Take it away, and Christianity becomes mere paganism' ('Sickness unto Death', London: Penguin, 1989, p.159). Here we have the sting of salt on the wound, and without it we descend into an

accommodating gospel that merely affirms the 'self-making' work, medicates the anxiety, and plays the game, becoming nothing more than a form of paganism. 'They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace' (Jeremiah 6:14). The saltiness of the gospel, that speaks boldly of our fallen nature, our sin, our shame, and our hope in Christ alone, as the only means to forgiveness, rest, and peace with God and ourselves, will sting - it goes against the grain - but it is true (in the true sense of the word!). Only the truth will set us free, and that truth is most salty when it's expressed on the cross of Christ, and again when we pick up ours. As Jesus said, 'Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life' (John 12:25). Jesus doesn't accommodate our lives, he transforms them.

There is a certain 'ripeness' in the harvest field, but we must resist accommodating strategies and seek prayerfully the creative movement of the Holy Spirit. Let's seek the Holy Spirit to become a missional church that confidently leads people to where the rock can be found; ancient and unchanging and yet ever new to our hearts and imagination; where the lost, anxious, despairing, self-hating, exhausted, and confused can find who they really are: forgiven - surrendered into the embrace of God - and called a chosen people, sons and daughters of God. A repentant discovery, a change of direction, a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of resources, that lead to an identity in Christ that is always already a gift and not a work.

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