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The "P"-Word: Conversion in a Postmodern Environment

BY BRAD J. KALLENBERG

Allow me to write frankly about the "P"-word. There is great concern about the proliferation of the "P"-word. In the past decade, over 1,500 articles and 2,000 books have come into print bearing the "P"-word in their titles. Nearly 1,000 of these books are still in print. Everywhere we turn we find that we have been inundated with the "P"-word. And so we have come to fear for our culture. The "P"-word? "Postmodernism."

Granted, postmodernism is a slippery concept; there are many versions, many postmodernisms. But should Christians fear postmodernism? To be sure, the modern era proved to be no particular friend of the faith. For whatever faults existed in medieval churches, at least they were well-attended. But since the seventeenth century, church attendance in the West has plummeted. In a good week, five percent of Western Europe attends church, while church attendance in the United States barely makes it into double digits.

So the ending of modernity may not be a bad thing. Yet what guarantee have we that the gospel will fare any better in these supposedly postmodern times?

None. Yet the gospel is a robust "virus," one that is able to inhabit virtually any cultural host. As William James once quipped, "The philosophical climate of the times inevitably forces its clothing on us." Just as there have been authentic Christians of Platonic, Aristotelian, existentialist, even Marxist stripe, so too, it may please God to raise up authentically postmodern Christians. Perhaps the missionary character of the gospel can inspire us to search out ways to employ insights of postmodern philosophy for the good of Jesus' Kingdom. I maintain that these insights change the very questions in which the task of evangelism is cast. But I must be clear at the outset what I mean by this.

It is not surprising that in the mechanistic universe we inherited from Descartes and Newton, evangelists hankered after appropriate philosophical crowbars for levering people into Christian belief. "If only we could provide plausible warrant for Christian truth claims." "If only we could verify in tangible ways the literal meaningfulness of spiritual terms such as 'God' and 'soul.'" "If only we could express the gospel in ways that resonate with the deepest longing of every human individual."

Of course many attempts were made to provide just such levers. But now it is commonplace to think that the dawning of this new age, this Postmodern Age, brings with it the awareness that all such projects have been summarily debunked. Instead, it is hoped that postmodern

philosophy offers new and improved methods by which individuals can be levered into the Kingdom, techniques that exceed the old ones in their effectiveness.

However, the change of conceptual schemes from modern to postmodern involves not simply retooling old crowbars into more effective ones; the mechanical view of evangelism is itself a modern metaphor that needs replacing. How now are we to think about evangelism? Perhaps postmodernism can school us away from the "how to" to the "to what." In other words, the crucial question for the church to ask is not "How are we to convert the unsaved?" but "To what are we asking them to convert?"

As the token Protestant who teaches ethics in an all-Catholic Department of Religious Studies, it fell to my lot to teach Protestant Christianity to the graduate students this past fall term. Of course, the colossal changes in Catholicism since Vatican II (in the late 1960s) made my job easier than it used to be. In some ways, contemporary Catholics stand much closer to conservative Protestant theology and ethics than to prior Catholic theology. Consequently, Catholic students are much more likely to see their reflection in the four marks of Protestantism (by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone, and by grace alone) than in the excesses that typified the medieval and early modern Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, since they lacked hands-on experience, I assigned each of them to visit Protestant churches and report on their experience to the rest of the class. The spectrum of churches they could choose to visit ranged from liberal to conservative, from Pentecostal to Anabaptist, from culturally homogenous to ethnically diverse, from the megachurch to the microchurch.

On the last day of the term, students were eager to tell what they had discovered. Thankfully, all the students reported very warm and positive experiences. However, I began to feel uneasy when, one-by-one, each student reported that the sermon he or she heard was not especially sound, exegetically speaking. In fact, many claimed that Bible verses were used sparingly, even haphazardly, as proof-texts for homilies about psychological wellness. (In one case, what mattered was not that Jesus calmed the storm but that he could sleep in the bow rather than succumb to the stress of a busy schedule!) The students asked, "I thought you Protestants were big on the Bible? But we read more Scripture in our services than these ministers preached about. What's the deal?"

I didn't know how to respond. I felt especially ashamed of the so-called evangelical churches for giving the Word such short shrift. One student confessed that he had always entertained a secret hope of finding "the noble Protestant savage" whose religion was pure and undefiled. His church visit convinced him that the Protestants had nothing of interest to offer.

When the Reformers first entered the pulpit, they made a point of trading in their priestly vestments for academic robes.¹ The message was clear: Reformation faith was serious scholarly business, and following Jesus involved, among other things, diligent renewal of the mind. But somewhere along the way, evangelical churches (Luther's preferred term for the Reform movement) went soft. In his own day, Luther bemoaned the fact that "the more certain we are

about the freedom granted to us by Christ, the more unresponsive and slothful we are in presenting the Word, praying, doing good works, enduring evil, and the like."²

While I hesitate to say we've grown slothful, I do think that churches may be losing their distinctiveness due to our inattention. In part, our problem can be traced to the fact that we have been bewitched by the myth that the best way to reach the unchurched is to translate the message into terms that anybody could understand. This is a particularly modern myth. In Hendrikus Berkhof's apt illustration, the church since the nineteenth century can be likened to a boat traveling down the river of time that attempted to clear the shoals of modernity by lightening its load. One by one, the items of scandalous particularity (the deity of Christ, the resurrection, etc.) were emptied out of the cargo bay. But alas, now the boat is empty, evacuated of any distinctive content.

Of course evangelicals quickly point out that Berkhof's analysis describes the history of Protestant liberalism and, after all, everyone knows that membership of liberal churches is on the wane. In contrast, effective evangelistic strategies must be found, or so it is claimed, by studying churches that are growing. But sadly, one finds among many megachurches the very same "user-friendly" strategy employed by liberal churches of the last century. What will be the fate of these churches?

Fortunately, there is more than one way to skin a cat. If there is a communication gap between the followers of Jesus and their secular counterparts, and this gap cannot be closed by translating the gospel into "secularese," then perhaps the gap can be closed by raising the level of fluency of the secular hearers so that they can understand the gospel on its own terms.

Perhaps now we can see why some are downright cheerful about the end of the mechanical age. Postmodern philosophy may open up ways for us to see evangelism in more living and organic ways. Specifically, postmodern insights about the nature of language help us appreciate that genuine conversion is tantamount to learning the Christian language from a community that participates in the mind of Christ by co-participating in their form of life and practices.

First, conversion involves language acquisition. Here I do not mean that non-Christians become Christians by some petty game of phrase-by-phrase same-saying. That would be magic. But becoming a Christian does involve learning a new conceptual language from believers who speak it. I might be able to learn some Norwegian by reading books and memorizing vocabulary. But I will never learn to bicker with the natives like a brother unless I become immersed into a community of Norwegian speakers. In a similar fashion, how can nonbelievers learn that "forgiveness" is not synonymous with "conflict resolution" nor "grace" with "freebie" except by being immersed in a community that uses forgiveness and grace properly? When we invite others to follow Jesus, we are asking them to learn a language by immersion into a community of speakers. We speak our language with them, and slowly they begin to hear with understanding. Conversion, then, can be likened to language acquisition. Consequently, evangelism is akin to language instruction; it requires of us the same patience and good humor required of my relatives who want to teach me Norwegian.

Second, there is a noetic or intellectual component of conversion. However, this turns out to be different than modern apologists imagine. David L. Schindler writes that nonbelievers are not hindered from conversion by faulty reasoning, but by an alternative logic. In other words, nonbelievers make "logical" mistakes about the true order of the cosmos (namely, they cannot see that the cosmos is ordered to the love of God) because this logic is "implicit in a way of life" that nonbelievers do not share. What Schindler urges, in response, is that attention be paid to the nurture of the believing community's "entire way of life . . . one that essentially includes a new and distinct logic."³ This distinctive mode of reasoning has been described as narrative because it amounts to learning to see the world through the story of Jesus.⁴ To once again illustrate a postmodern notion with a premodern source, Calvin saw the gospel record (and indeed the whole of Scripture) as the lens through which the world is brought into focus rather than the text over which our minds sit in judgment.⁵

Third, the invitation to conversation is simultaneously an invitation to participate with the community in a very particular form of life. This form of life is the basis for the sense of the language Christians speak. All language seems to work this way. To gain fluency in simple words such as "chair" means to become familiar with the vast number of things we do with chairs. We count them, stack them, fetch them, reserve them, reupholster them, stub our toes on them, and, sit on them (not to mention appointing, endowing, and resigning them!). All such activities are bound up in the meaning of the English word chair. The fact that language acquisition depends on regular participation in these very activities is why language is better learned by immersion into a community of native speakers than by rote memorization.

Now think of the word "God." How do we gain fluency with this word? Isn't it the same way? We pray to God, confess our sins to God, worship God, tell our neighbors about God, give offerings to God, and thank God. For Christ followers, there is a vast number of activities in which the word God is at home. Amazingly, participation in these activities is not only the means of knowing what Christians mean by the word God, it is the prescribed means for knowing God himself.

But consider the atheist. The atheist insists "God does not exist" and yet neither prays, confesses, thanks, witnesses, tithes, nor worships. What then is the meaning of the word God in the atheist's denial? Who is to say? After all, to the atheist who neither prays, sings, worships, confesses, nor witnesses, the word God is an empty concept!

What hope has the atheist of understanding Christian speech? None, if we believe the philosophers of modernity. For on their account, if all meaningful language must pass the bar of publicly accessible criteria, then God is a "No-See-Um." But postmodern insights about the internal relation between language and world⁶ enable us to appreciate the seriousness with which Luther saw the believing congregation as the Body of Christ: the one who encounters the singing, praying, confessing church meets God in action.⁷ Thus, in the final analysis, evangelism is seen to be a form of discipleship. For what is needed is precisely that community that robustly embodies in its practices this new and "foolish" (1 Cor. 1:23) mode of reasoning, this

mind of Christ, to the end that the church becomes, once again, the anchor and showcase of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

Let me try to give these thoughts more concrete form by telling a story I've written about elsewhere.⁸ My former neighbor across the street—let's call him "Bill"—has been converting to Christianity for the past three years. I met the "new-and-improved" Bill at the end of a period of great turmoil in his life. He and his common-law wife had been drug addicts. He had left his wife and gained custody of their son. He landed a job, but the physical demands of kicking mescaline had required him to sleep most of his off-hours during the first few months. The days crept by.

When I met Bill, he was sleeping better and had just decided to quit smoking and begin exercising. I figured "getting religion" was the logical next step on Bill's self-help program. So I invited Bill to come to church. First, he attended a children's musical (our kids play together). Then he began attending worship. Somewhere along the line I gave him a Bible, which he undertook to read from cover to cover. On Sundays, I watched in amazement as he learned to sing songs of worship. Now, it has been said that more lies are spoken over the cover of a hymnal than anywhere else on the planet. But Bill's tuneful worship was not self-deceiving (as if he were assuring himself that things were on the level with God when, in fact, he was still far off) but rather a training to see life under the aspect of the gospel, a learning to see things as they really are.

In time, Bill was baptized and publicly gave as clear a presentation of his journey to Christ as he was able to muster at his level of understanding. He also began attending meetings with a small group in our church.

Somewhere in this process of conversion, Bill was no longer self-helping himself into religion. Rather, he learned to correctly see himself as the recipient of an undeserved and saving grace.

Bill's process of conversion cannot be distilled into a linear cause-and-effect chain that could be programmatized for anyone. Rather, what took place in Bill's life was the involvement in a conversation. Initially, Bill participated as a recipient; he heard the gospel embodied in the kids' musical, in the preaching of sermons, in the prayers of others; he read the text as a recipient of a notable message. And yet he also shifted his stance to participate in the conversation as an advocate. He sang songs as unto God; he gave a personal testimony before his baptism; he incarnated the gospel in miniature in the enactment of his baptism; he co-participated with the rest of the Body of Christ in incarnating the story of remembrance we call Eucharist; and he participates even now in acts of charity and care for his fellow believers through the ministry of our small group.

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Formulation of the Doctrine of Conversion” in the *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (October 1995), 335-364.

NOTES

1. Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., "Ministry and Scholarship in the Reformed Tradition," in *Scholarship, Sacraments and Service: Historical Studies in Protestant Tradition*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin and W. David Buschart (Edwin Mellen Press, 1990).
2. Cited in Mary Gaebler, "Luther on the Self," in *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 22 (2002), 126.
3. David L. Shindler, "Religion and Secularity in a Culture of Abstraction," in *The Strange New World of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Eerdmans, 2002), 44.
4. Stanley Hauerwas, with David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 15-39. See also Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (Yale University Press, 1974).
5. "Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God." John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion in Two Volumes, The Library of Christian Classics Vol. XX* (Westminster Press, 1960), I.6.1.
6. See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar: Changing the Postmodern Subject* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).
7. Reinhard Hütter, "The Church," in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Eerdmans, 2001), 23.
8. Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Brazos Press, 2002), 63-64.

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