

[Positional Paper Topic: Ministry and Evangelism in Contemporary Canadian Society]

The following two articles were previously published in the Canadian Free Methodist Herald and are being prepared to be published in a book. (Copyright 2002 Robert D. Clements) They point us to the question of how we speak to others about Christ in a pluralistic context. Following these two articles, there is an annotated bibliography of a range of works which would relate to ministry and evangelism in contemporary Canadian society.

MOVING BEYOND MORALISM

"Well, that maybe true for you -but it's not true for me."

"I can't believe you are so ignorant that you believe Jesus is the only way to God."

How do you respond when people say things like this? Many Christians in Canada aren't sure what to say. For more than a thousand years the Christian church has dominated Western culture. But Christians today increasingly find themselves excluded from the public discourse, just another minority among a growing number of special-interest groups. The result is that pluralism--"the belief in many" - is one of the greatest challenges facing the church today.

Which pluralism?

The challenge of pluralism confronts the church on many levels. There is *political pluralism* which allows us to express our own opinions. There is also *cultural pluralism*, which describes a country like Canada where people are encouraged to celebrate their cultural heritage. These forms of pluralism are not unChristian, though they may force us to think harder about how we reach out to different cultural groups and respect the political beliefs of people who disagree with us. It is interesting to note that some historians suggest that Canada's tolerance for cultural and political diversity has actually emerged from its Christian heritage; many Muslim countries, they point out, have little tolerance for those who think differently. Some even see "secularism" as a Christian invention!

It is important, however, to distinguish cultural pluralism and political tolerance from *religious pluralism*. Religious pluralism asserts that all religions are equal, and that it is wrong to assert any idea to the contrary. Cultural pluralism--the idea that cultural expressions are all relative--has grounding in Scripture (read Acts 15, for example), but religious pluralism is incongruent with everything the Bible teaches about who Jesus is and what Jesus did. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father except by me" (John 10:14). He did not claim to be a saviour among many; he declared himself *the* saviour.

But if Scripture is so clear on this, why is pluralist thinking so common nowadays? How has it infiltrated the church? A major contributing factor is *religious moralism*. Webster's dictionary defines moralism as an "often exaggerated emphasis on morality." Christians, of course, believe that people ought to strive to be moral in God's grace. But religious moralism goes further.

Moralists believe that Christianity is *only* about human decisions, *only* about being moral. Moralists make it seem as if you *earn* your salvation by your good actions or decisions for God. Yes, they might admit, we're all sinners, but everyone has the power inside them to change, to turn away from their sin and follow God. All people are created equal, they say, but some choose to follow God and others reject him. God rejects those who don't *choose him*. God rewards those who help themselves.

There are many problems with moralism, but here are three of the biggest ones:

#1) Moralism is contrary to Scripture

Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). The Bible teaches that we are saved by grace through faith. We do not *earn* our salvation by our actions, not even by our ability to choose. Jesus said that no one comes to him unless the Father draws him or her first (John 6:44). This gets at the heart of what theologians call "the doctrine of election." *Election* is the belief that, contrary to our human-centred sensibilities, God chooses some people to accomplish his purposes - and not others - at least not for now.

God's calling of us is not based on our response to him, it is "prevenient"; that is, the Holy Spirit works ahead of our response preparing us, drawing us into his plans. In other words, we are not saved by our own decision to follow God; we are saved by God when we awaken and respond in faith to God's prior choosing of us.

Many people are uncomfortable with the word *election* because some theologians have said that election means that God *determines* that some people go to heaven and others to go hell; God in effect decrees some people to condemnation and others to heaven.

Free Methodists reject that understanding of election, often called the "unconditional" view of election. Instead, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, argued for *conditional* election. Sadly, not everyone that the Spirit draws will respond. Some people resist the Holy Spirit, reject Christ, and are condemned. "This is the verdict," said Jesus, "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light" (John 3:19). Scripture teaches that people can separate themselves from God. Hell is what Christians call the ultimate and final separation.

Election is a powerful and undeniable biblical truth. It is wrong to deny it. At the same time, it is not our job to determine who is elect and who is not--as some Christians have done historically. It is far more important for us to ask ourselves what we have been elected to do, understanding that God's purpose in electing us is to bring "salvation to the ends of the earth."

It may be helpful at this point to make a distinction between a "theological mystery" and "theological problem."

A theological problem is a practical obstacle to living out one's faith. A problem paralyses the believer so that they cannot act out their faith. A theological problem needs to be resolved in order for a Christians to follow Christ. Martin Luther, for example, encountered a theological problem when he realized his inability to save himself through good works. Luther's problem was human in origin and the resolution of his dilemma came through a careful examination of God's word revealed in Scripture. God, he discovered, has clearly revealed to us that salvation is by faith and not good works. There is no ambiguity in the Bible on this matter.

A theological mystery, on the other hand, is something that is beyond our understanding, but something that we do not necessarily need to understand completely in order to function as Christians. The correct response to mystery is trust and faith in the personal character of God as he has revealed himself to us. The incorrect response to a theological mystery is to assert what God has left unspoken. Most Christian heresies have begun as attempts to define what God has left undefined.

Note well that theological mystery lies at the very core of Christianity. How can Jesus be both man and God? (The Trinity) How can the death of one man two thousand years ago take away my sins today? (The Atonement) If God is omnipotent and good, why does he allow evil and suffering to exist? (Creation). Most heresies through Christian history have begun as attempts to rationalize what God has left unexplained, or that our finite minds cannot grasp.

Clearly Scripture teaches that God has chosen us in Christ before the beginning of the world. And yet Scripture also asserts that we are responsible for our actions. Moreover, God at times has appeared to change his mind (remember the story of Jonah?). The historical tendency has been for Christians to cling to some passages and reject others, resulting in camps on either end of the continuum--Wesley on one end, Calvin on the other. But this selectiveness should alert us to the fact that Scripture does not claim *either* predestination or free will, but rather elements of *both*. Some events have clearly been predestined (Rev. 22), and others appear to be conditional upon human response. Scripture is ambiguous on this matter -- and this is the first clue that we are dealing with an issue that should be categorized as a "theological mystery" beyond our finite human understanding.

#2) Moralism ignores the facts that lead many people to pluralism.

"All people are created equal" is not in the Bible - it is part of the American Constitution, which is designed to protect the legal rights of all human beings. That's fine in the political arena. But theologically Christians believe a human's worth is found in our being created in the image of God, not in a legal document. Sadly, the spiritual reality is that some people, due to physical and mental challenges, do not have equal opportunity to accept Christ and live out the gospel. Some people do not even have Bibles in their language. Some people have cognitive problems or mental illnesses which inhibit their decision-making. Millions of people in the world today have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ simply because they were born in a different culture, and billions more throughout history have died without ever knowing the name of Jesus Christ. Honest seekers want to know how Christianity deals with these issues, and an honest Christian response to pluralism needs to address these realities--which are becoming more and more evident as we learn more about other cultures. Moralism cannot provide such answers. Instead, by idolizing human power to change, it produces a deadly legalism and cultural insensitivity. Worse, by denying our deep-rooted original sin and our helplessness to change ourselves apart from the Holy Spirit, moralists write off everybody who cannot live up to their standards as ignorant or lazy. No wonder people react against it so strongly.

#3) Christian moralism falls apart in a pluralist society

More than any other time in North America, Christians are being exposed to the variety of world religions. As one Christian observer has put it: "The end of the world has come to the end of the block." The Canadian city of Surrey, British Columbia, now has the second largest population of Sikhs of any city in the world. And statistically most North Americans know at least one person who adheres to a non-Christian religion, or new religion such as Mormonism. As a result, it is more important than ever before for Christians to think clearly about how we view other religions.

On a practical level, Christians with moralist tendencies have no defense against pluralism. If God judges us by our intentions only, then why can't good Buddhists and Hindus be saved too? What makes Jesus so special in a world full of religions?

The moralist has no response except to concede that all religions are good as long as they produce good, moral people. Soon the Christian moralist ceases to be a Christian.

If we read Scripture carefully, however, we see that moralism does not square with biblical Christianity. There is a choice to be made: either moralism is right and the Bible false, or it is the other way round.

The Bible reveals God's plan of salvation for all people everywhere, not just white English-speaking Canadians. But that is not to say there are not important questions that the church needs to ask about other cultures and other beliefs. How do we approach other religions? What

happens to people who have never heard of Jesus? To answer these questions we need to go back to Scripture and relearn what it means to be God's chosen people.

How do we develop a functional faith for a pluralist society? You start reading God's story, you figure out what "chapter" you're in, and then you *get with the program*. Getting with the program means getting a grip on what God was doing with people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It means drawing lines between David, King of Israel, and Jesus, King of the Jews. It means seeing yourself and your context through the eyes of Scripture. In our day, it means reflecting on how biblical characters like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego worked in their pagan context.

When we do this we begin to see what God cares about, and we begin to see ourselves as participants in God's story of redemption rather than as people who are responsible for changing the world ourselves. All of us need to be reminded of that occasionally.

For Further Reading

Pinnock, Clark H., *WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY: THE FINALITY OF JESUS CHRIST IN A WORLD OF RELIGIONS* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1992)

Newbigin, Leslie, *THE GOSPEL IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1994).

Boyd, Gregory A., *GOD OF THE POSSIBLE: A BIBLICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE OPEN VIEW OF GOD*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books: 2000).

Walsh, Brian J.; Middleton, J. Richard, *TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN IT USED TO BE : BIBLICAL FAITH IN A POSTMODERN AGE* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

J. N. D. Anderson, *CHRISTIANITY AND COMPARATIVE RELIGION* (London: Tyndale Press, 1970).

Kreeft, Peter, *A REFUTATION OF MORAL RELATIVISM: INTERVIEWS WITH AN ABSOLUTIST* (Ignatius Press (October, 1999).

Basinger, David. *RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT* (Ashgate, 2002)

http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/05_relativism.htm

http://www.vow.org/viewpoints/essays/xxxxxxx-gasque-is_jesus_the_only_way.html

TWO HUMANISMS

Let us make man in our image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

-Genesis 1:27

The word Humanism has become a kind of shorthand for Secular Humanism. That is unfortunate because Christianity has just as much right to the title. Humanism, in its original and most general usage, simply means "a doctrine, attitude or way of life devoted to human interests or value."

The truest and sturdiest form of humanism is Christian humanism, and its foundation is located in the opening chapter of the Bible when God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..."

The Jewish and Christian understanding that human beings are created in the image of God, rather than being haphazard accidents of chance in the universe is the lynchpin that has held the social fabric of Western societies together for hundreds of years. Take this belief away, and much of Western civilization comes crashing down, collapsing into a cultural tug of war over "rights."

That is what we have seen in North America since the cultural revolution of the 1960s: Abortion, euthanasia, doctor-assisted suicide - all have become debates over whose rights are more important. Secular humanists are not interested in values, which they equate with mere personal preference and opinion; only human rights, which they falsely believe can be objectively ascertained without reference to God.

The only issue the secular humanist sees in the abortion debate is whether a woman's right to control her body is more important than the rights of a "fetus"--which the secular humanist often argues isn't quite fully human anyway. (No doubt the unborn would answer differently.)

But the Christian humanist, looking at the world through the lens of Scripture, asks a different question: Does the intrinsic value of an unborn human being created in the image of God by God outweigh the value of human freedom? And surely it does. Otherwise one could justify killing any group of people - never mind unborn children - whenever it was convenient and we could get away with it. Bear in mind the memory of Adolph Hitler, who respected the "rights" of Jews, Poles, homosexuals, Jehovah Witness and the disabled only long enough to gain the political power to enslave or incinerate them in giant ovens during World War II. God forbid that such atrocities are ever repeated in another nation that calls itself "Christian."

There is no indication in Scripture that God removed the image of God from humanity after Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of Eden. The belief that human beings are created in the image of God must therefore govern how we engage our society; it compels us to respect and tolerate those who think differently from us.

Adherents of other religions, those with no religion, gays and lesbians, doctors who perform abortions--all were created in the image of God, all retain the image of God. As we engage our pluralistic society we must always keep that in mind. Though the image may be distorted we are not at liberty to treat those who oppose God's will as anything less than people created in the image of God by God. That is why murdering doctors who perform abortions is wrong (Genesis 9:6) That is why "gaybashing" is wrong (James 3:6). That is why Christians should uphold

religious freedom and human dignity of other people besides Christians. We must be willing to tolerate and respect the opinions of those who disagree with us. Anything else is hypocrisy.

There is, however, a distinction to be made between tolerance and affirmation. Tolerance means putting up with differences, affirmation means putting away those differences. The church, God's holy community, must not compromise its own position in the name of tolerance.

Unfortunately in our zeal to uphold truth, Christians have sometimes pushed and manipulated others by political or legal means into our own patterns. The opening chapters of Genesis, however, presents us with a God who intended for us to reflect his image in the world freely, not do what he commands resentfully. It is not God's normal way to coerce us into his fellowship, to force us into his patterns. We were designed to need him, but he does not manipulate us into something we do not want. He desires us to freely love him, to desire him. Only then can we fully be who we have been created to be: his image-bearers on earth. And if we are going to reflect his image accurately it follows that we will not coerce humans to believe in him either.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

It is the important work of the Church in Canada to contextualize the gospel for Canadian society and beyond. Fortunately, we have a growing number of authors who articulate this in clear and challenging ways. Below is a list of excellent books for anyone wishing to expand their understanding and do better in ministry and evangelism.

Bibby, Reginald

Restless Gods

This book is a much needed examination of the religious mindset among Canadians. Bibby extrapolates numbers from the last few years and then points out their significance. Canadians are not attracted to the mainline answers although they still feel something for them (that 'something' is hard to define). There is a move towards the esoteric. People are experiencing the supernatural all over the country, just not all that much in church. Quebec is a ready opportunity for the gospel according to the data from this book. It gives clear indications where Bibby believes the rest of Canada is moving. Reginald Bibby teaches at the University of Lethbridge. You may want to visit his website to see other pertinent books.

McLaren, Brian ***A New Kind of Christian***

Books by Brian McLaren are a must read for anyone interested in better connecting to those inside or outside the church. He is a pastor who sees the shifting in values and is determined to take the gospel into his world free from the cultural encumbrances we can so easily embrace as absolutes. He writes using the narrative which makes it easier for non-readers but what he says can make us uncomfortable.

To review his books, visit his website at www.anewkindofchristian.com

Emberley, Peter C. ***Divine Hunger, Canadians On Spiritual Walkabout***

Emberley examines the current hunger of Canadians for the spiritual. What is helpful about this book is that it is written by a Canadian about Canadians. This book looks at boomers who are on the divine quest. Excellent information for those wanting to reach Canadians.

Greenspon, Edward & Bricker D. ***Searching For Certainty***

Bricker is a pollster and Greenspon an award winning journalist. Both are Canadians who have spent significant time researching other Canadians and how they think. This book offers an overview of economic, social, and cultural shifts taking place in the Canadian mind.

Posterski, Don & Nelson, Gary ***Future Faith Churches***

Don Posterski and Gary Nelson went looking for Canadian churches that will lead the way into the next millenium. They conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with clergy and church members from churches representing evangelical and mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. *Future Faith Churches* shares their research findings.

Mitchell, Marva *It Takes A Church To Raise A Village*

These are wild times for the church. People are actually open to us if we are willing to be open to them and love them. Creative ministry opportunities abound and the funding is available from the most unlikely sources to support these new ministries. Mitchell wonders what the church is waiting for.

Otis, George, Jr. *God's Trademarks*

This is a convicting examination of what constitutes valid ministry. It is a call to have the plumb line of scripture as the guide to keep us from going off the rails in order to be relevant. This is a voice that needs to be considered when doing a “new thing.”

Easum, William *Dancing With Dinosaurs*

This book warned the church to prepare for massive cultural shifts that will take place. Unfortunately many churches continued to behave as they always have and are now paying a high price for their ostrich-like stance.

Pierce, Bart *Seeking Our Brothers*

People are waiting to see more of the church in action. We say we care about the poor. “Show us, stop talking about it,” says a culture around us.

McLuhan, Eric *The Medium and the Light, Reflections on Religion*

Eric McLuhan has collected many of his famous father's, Marshall McLuhan's, reflections on God and media, Bible, Christianity, the church and Canadians. These are brilliant insights and very prophetic. McLuhan predicted the electronic information age and its impact on society and the church. His statements are reminiscent of C.S. Lewis and in that same style. McLuhan is rarely mentioned by Canadian church leaders. He is a hidden Canadian treasure and we need to unveil him and hear what he has to say. He was a devout follower of Christ. McLuhan is quite relevant to what we are now facing as a society. His words can make one uncomfortable.

Postman, Neil *Technopoly*

In this provocative work Neil Postman sees our transformation from a society that uses technology to one that is shaped by it. He traces its effects upon what we mean by politics, intellect, religion, history – even privacy and truth. But if *Technopoly* is disturbing, it is also a passionate rallying cry filled with a humane rationalism as it asserts the manifold means by which technology, placed within the context of our larger human goals and social values, is an invaluable instrument for furthering the most worthy human endeavors. We can use it further in our communication for the cause of the gospel without losing our sense of being in touch with one another. There is a disconnect that is taking place out there and people are craving contact...touch.

Robinson, Martin *Rediscovering The Celts*

The Celts were a people willing to do whatever it took to reach others for the kingdom of Christ. They believed that culture is an effective tool to be used to the advantage of the Gospel. The Celtic church had missionary zeal. We can learn from them in our approach to the new world we live in.

Sweet, Leonard *A Cup Of Coffee At The Soul Café*

This is a book of earthy Christian philosophy without going over anyone's head. It may be helpful in establishing a bridge to people or just prepping for conversation with those in our culture. Sweet writes in a similar way for a number of his more recent books including *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*.

For titles and reviews, visit his website at www.leonardsweet.com