Serious about secular society?

Christian witness in the secularized West

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Christian witness is generally having a tough time in the secularized West. While the nations of Europe, North America, and Australasia have a strong heritage of Christian faith, most people in these regions live as though they had no such heritage. To them God simply has little or no specific impact.

The following perspectives may help us understand what is happening and how to meet it.

1. *Understand our responsibility to the world.* Traditionally, we have emphasized that the world is the devil's domain. This has led some to distance themselves from the world. But the world will always be God's creation, though marred by sin and its effects. All humans have been made in the image of God and are objects of His saving mission. God so loved the world that He sent His Son to salvage it. Our mission to the world is God's mission.

While we rightly emphasize separation from the sin of the world, we give too little attention to the New Testament theme of incarnation and what it implies. Paul recognized this imperative when he wrote that he had "become all things to all people," so that he "might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22).*

Can we do any less? Isn't this as much a part of the Great Commission as is any other aspect of the biblical definition of it?

2. *Enlarge the concept of mission.* One reason for the success of the spread of the gospel has been a consistent focus on preaching the gospel to every "nation and tribe and language and people" (Rev. 14:6). By the grace of God may we never lose this emphasis.

To reach the secular world effectively we need to have a better understanding of our mission and method. A profound insight into the method of our approach is described: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me.'"[1]

Under this approach, Christ "mingled," "desired their good," "showed His sympathy," "ministered to their needs," and "won their confidence" before He asked them to follow Him. These actions—mingling, sympathizing, winning their confidence—were as much a part of His strategy as was the invitation to follow Him. There are four significant elements of such a comprehensive understanding of mission that must be implemented:

a. *Fellowship.* When God conducted the greatest evangelistic campaign of the ages, He did so as Immanuel—God with us. He chose incarnation (fellowship) as the first essential element of His method (Phil. 2:5-11). Christ's method was to be one with the people. His high ethical standards did not prevent Him from reaching people as diverse as Mary Magdalene, Levi Matthew, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus, the Roman centurion, and Simon Peter, to name a few. He did not remain distant, aloof, or separate. The exact opposite was true.

b. *Service.* Jesus' ministry was one of service. Service was so important to Jesus' ministry that He declared that Simon Peter could have no part with Him unless He willingly acknowledged Jesus' service (John 13:8, 9).

Unselfish service is a very powerful moral force in secular society. People will take notice of those whom they perceive to be unselfish, humble, genuine, and caring. In fact, people who do not see themselves as "religious" will usually be much more willing to acknowledge such people as genuine Christians than they will be willing to recognize the person who delivers a "sermon."

c. *Justice.* Closely allied to service is the concept of justice. Micah's call is still valid today:

"He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NIV). The call for just action is repeated by almost all the prophets of the Old Testament (Isa. 1:15-18; Amos 5:21-24; Ps. 146:5-10).

Christ powerfully reaffirmed the same imperative. Notice, for example, Matthew 23:23, 24 (NIV): "'Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.'"

Christ calls His people individually and corporately to strive for justice to the oppressed, the fatherless, the widow, the lost. We will be more like Christ if we "desire their good" in a practical way than if we preach the gospel in a theoretical, irrelevant, let-me-set-you-straight manner that makes it impossible for a person to hear what we are saying.

d. *Proclamation.* The climactic event in mission occurs when the invitation is given and accepted to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To accomplish this, we must do as Christ did. We must mingle, desire the good of people, show sympathy for them, meet their needs, and win their confidence.

3. *Adopt an incarnational paradigm for mission.* We have called people out of the world to come and see what great things God can do. We have stressed the importance of obedience, sanctification, and separation. We have insisted on a lifestyle and ethic that is appropriate for one who honors Christ as Savior and Lord. And so it should be because to do so is biblical and true to the deep needs of the human soul.

Unfortunately in so doing, we may have failed to realize that there is another biblical imperative. That imperative is to infiltrate the world. "Go ye into all the world . . ." "Go and make disciples . . ." "[Go] to every nation, and tribe, and language, and people." We have no option but by the Holy Spirit to incarnate ourselves in the world for the sake of the world, and for the sake of the gospel. Again, this is what Jesus did.

Maybe we have not sufficiently explored or implemented an incarnational paradigm of mission as described in Philippians 2:5-8. God's ministry through the church is done in the world just as Christ's ministry in His incarnation was done in the world. God is at work in the world. He is at work reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:17-19). The world is the object of the plan of salvation (John 3:16). It is to be the object of the church's activity.

4. *Understand God's self-revelation through the process of inspiration.* Perhaps one reason for our struggle with the incarnational paradigm is our failure to understand God's self-revelation through the process of inspiration. Despite the ravages of sin, God did not choose to remain isolated, separated and hidden from His creation. Rather, He chose to take a risk and submit the eternal gospel to such variants as time, culture, language, personality, and education.

Our doctrine of inspiration tells us that God communicated Himself, the gospel, and His intention to save through human words, images, and customs. He decided what He wanted to communicate, but in doing so He did not obliterate the language, personality, or culture of the chosen instrument. Each used his or her faculties freely, while the divine message or intent remained intact.

Then, when "the Word became flesh"—the climax of God's self-communication—the same process occurred. Christ became a first-century Palestinian Jew who experienced pain, hunger, and exposure. Yet when He became one of us He did not cease to be Himself. He remained forever the eternal Word—God Himself—yet incarnated in human form.

Christ's incarnation enabled Him to identify with us in our humanity while at the same time He retained His identity as God (John 1:1-3).

5. *Adapt relevant evangelistic practices.* We cannot assume that secular people will be able to hear the message if we use methods that only work well where there is a recognition of Christian values and norms.

WE NEED TO START OUR INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE IN OTHER WAYS THAN WITH OBJECTIVE TRUTH.

In a secular context, the decision-making process demands that we commence our interaction with people differently.[2] Like Jesus, we need to meet them where they are and utilize strategies and methods that render the gospel hearable for them.

6. *How then should we reach out to secular people? Consider the following:*

a. *An incarnational mission.* To be incarnational in a secular context, we need to do several things:

We need to start our interaction with people in other ways than with objective truth. Secular people need to see how Christianity meets their deepest needs. This does not mean that we give up our commitment to objective truth. It means that we have another starting point.

Alastair McGrath has suggested two primary factors apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. The first is "the attractiveness of God"—the ability of God to satisfy the deepest fundamental needs of the individual;

the overwhelming love of God demonstrated in Christ's death, and the stability and purpose which we can have as faith in God develops within us. The secular relativist cries out for such stability and purpose.

The other factor is "the relevance of Christianity to life." McGrath has pointed out that all human beings have the need for a basis for morality. We have a need to have a framework by which we make sense of experience. We have a need for a vision to guide and inspire us as individuals.[3]

We need to remember that most people learn through a narrative/inductive approach. Peter Corney has said it well: "Post-modern people are less linear in their approach to communication and knowledge than the previous generation. Less deductive, more inductive. Less word-oriented, more visual. Less cerebral, more experiential. Less propositional, more story-related.

"The questions in their minds will be 'Does it work?' and 'How will it affect my life?' After an event or service they are more likely to ask 'What did you experience?' than 'What did you learn?'

"This does not mean rationality has been abandoned—it simply no longer stands alone. It has been expanded to include experience. The subjective has invaded the objective. This also means that the context in which we preach . . . will be as important as the content."[4]

We should cultivate relationships with secular people. We need to express ourselves with humility maintaining an emphasis on servanthood and Christ's Lordship.

b. *A God-centered mission.* All ministry is God's ministry. His intention is to save the world (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). Christ came as the supreme revelation of the person and character of God to facilitate that ministry (Heb. 1:1, 2). Those who have been created new in Christ Jesus are called to participate with God in that ministry (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

God sends (Mark 1:2; Luke 9:2; Rom. 10:15), gives (John 3:16), serves (Luke 22:27), loves (John 3:16; 1 John 4:11-21), and calls (Acts 16:10). The world does not set the agenda for ministry. God sets the agenda and focuses it in the world, so that it becomes our agenda. Jesus was very clear on what that focus should be. If He were lifted up He would draw all people, including those with the strongest secular bent, to Him.

c. *The congregation as mission.* While it is true that the church must go out into the world, it is also true that the world must be invited and welcomed into the church. This welcome has two components:

First, the church must prepare the world to join the church. When the congregation is able to welcome the world and wrap it into the fellowship of believers in such a way that healing and growth forms a continuum, then the congregation fulfills its mission.

Second, is the manner in which the congregation engages the world. While there must always be a certain element of the haphazard in the interaction of the believer with the world, the congregation must be intentional about planning and resourcing a process that will provide opportunities for its members to interact with the world.

To reach secular people, *process* should have priority over *event.* One event will usually not be sufficient. The congregation must provide a variety of options to facilitate the movement of people toward faith.

d. *Values transmission.* Mission to secular people is not primarily information transmission. While we need to share information in the form of propositional truth, we must be more focused on values transmission.

Today, people rarely ask, "What is truth?" Their first question generally is, "Where is meaning?" Their interest will be aroused when their scale of values is challenged to the extent that they are led to realize that ultimate meaning cannot be derived from their secular scale of values.

Merton Strommen has suggested four elements that contribute to a values-transmission approach to witness and evangelism:[5]

First, *commitment.* Commitment to the Lord and His message is foundational if we are to communicate values.

Second, *authenticity.* Nothing is as destructive to our witness as lack of authenticity. Contemporary people are particularly suspicious of those whom they perceive to be unauthentic. They are disillusioned with the church for that very reason. They are so accustomed to having their trust shattered that if they sense any hint of sham, there is an immediate and total loss of any further opportunity to share values.

Third, *modeling.* A model Christian is a powerful force for good. All people, secular or otherwise, are moved by the witness of those who live their life by the values they espouse.

Fourth, *personal witness.* Values transmission is best accomplished on a person-to-person level. Values are almost always caught rather than taught.

Conclusion

Nothing is impossible for God. God loves everyone. This being so, the church cannot relegate mission to the secular world to the "too hard" basket. Rather, we must believe Jesus' promise that "this gospel of the kingdom will go to all the world, for a witness unto all nations." With this conviction, we must go forward to accomplish that mission. ■

* All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

1 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1942), 143.

2 For an insightful discussion of the decision-making process see James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communication* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 63-87.

3 Alastair McGrath. *Bridge Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 226, 227.

4 Peter Corney, "Have You Got the Right Address? Post-Modernism and the Gospel," *Grid,* Spring 1995, 2.

5 Merton P. Strommen, "Communicating Values," in *Perspectives on Values,* ed. V. Bailey Gillespie (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1993), 21–46.