

**ECCLESIASTES:
MISSION IN A
POSTMODERN/
POST-
CHRISTIAN
WORLD**

By

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Mission in a post-modern world:¹ What a challenge for the Christian! But, it is a challenge that must be undertaken if we are to be obedient to our Lord's command to make disciples of every nation. For this to happen there needs to be an understanding of the nature and scope of the challenge, as well as the development of strategies to confront and overcome it. The book of Ecclesiastes, though written in an era far removed from this postmodern one, gives insight that should be carefully considered and appropriated as we seek to effectively communicate the exclusivist claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, in post-modern thought, "any notion that a particular ideology or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is necessarily wrong. The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism." Therefore, "no religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true and the others false, or even ... relatively inferior" (Carson 1996, 19). This indeed constitutes a paradigm shift. In the 'modern' era, "science, scholarship, and serious study were thought capable of resolving most problems, of answering most questions, of understanding all of reality" (Carson 1996, 19-20). This, however, was not borne out by experience. What was thought of as an understanding was

¹ Postmodernist thought is not unified. Therefore, not all the ideas that are expressed as coming out of post-modernism will be held by all postmodernists.

really interpretation. There is, in fact, no objective understanding of reality.

All worldviews, on a postmodern reading, are merely human inventions, decisively conditioned by the social context in which they occur, and certainly not given to us by either nature or revelation ... [and so] any "truth" we claim for our cherished positions must be kept strictly in quotation marks. (Middleton and Walsh 1995, 4-5).

As a matter of fact, they are often, if not always, tools of domination.

This, of course, has grave implications for the Christian faith, which says in no uncertain terms that Jesus Christ is *the Truth, the Life, the Light, the only Way to God*. This is the exclusivist claim of the gospel. It is a claim that speaks to faith, to how people ought to live, to the One to whom people are ultimately accountable: God through Jesus Christ; and to an ultimate judgment. In other words, "Christian theology proclaims not just any 'god' that we may happen to dream up ... We speak of a God ... who has a concrete identity, the God of Israel, the God who liberated a captive people from bondage and gave them the Torah to lead them into the ways of life," (Johnson 2001, 5) and who wants to transform the life of postmodern man and liberate him from the depths of despair.

TO HOPE OR NOT TO HOPE

In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher raises the question, "What profit hath man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?" (1:3 KJV)²

Life does not with any obviousness seem to be going anywhere. Rather, it is a ceaseless round. There is plenty of movement, but it is cyclical, ever turning repetitiously upon itself. (Kinlaw 1968, 611)

Life is thus compared to the cycle of the seasons. Is life going anywhere? Is there any profit in it after all? "What good is there for the sons of men to do under heaven the few years of their lives?" (2:3). The Preacher

makes no appeal to divine revelation to solve this problem ... Is he carefully seeking to demonstrate the absolute inability of man unaided by revelation to pierce the darkness that engulfs the natural man, and to find through his own seeking the key to life? (Kinlaw 1968, 612-3)

² All Scriptural references are from the American Standard Translation unless otherwise indicated.

And so, although the writer speaks out of a theistic worldview, much of what he says reflects a postmodern outlook on life, for he grapples with unmitigated candour the perplexities and seeming meaninglessness of life. He, therefore, says of wisdom: "it is a grievous task"(1:13). He had set his mind to "know wisdom and to know madness and folly" but realized that "this also [was] striving after wind, because in much wisdom is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain" (1:13, 17-18). Of pleasure, he says: "it too was futility ... What does it accomplish?" (2:1). And of material gain he says:

I hated all the fruit of my [labour] for which I had [laboured] under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who must come after me. And who knows if he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my [labour] for which I have [laboured] by acting wisely under the sun... When there is a man who has [laboured] with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not [laboured] with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. (2: 18-19, 21)

And so he concludes: "Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my [labour.]" (2:20). There is no guarantee your heritage/legacy will be preserved, especially in a context where there is no set standard, there are no absolutes, where morality is relative. So your attempts to make a contribution for posterity, for the benefit of future generations may indeed be futile.

It is no wonder that scholars like J.A Loader contend that,

the book serves to remind man that whatever knowledge he may possibly possess, it can never claim to be a 'self-sufficient system.' One may never pretend to speak anything with certainty and conviction. Man must never claim to have the final answer to life's riddle. Most especially he must never assume that he can say anything definite about God and His ways, 'for God and his actions are never the prisoner of fixed patterns... Ecclesiastes represents a protest against all closed systems of truth; it opposes man in his attempts to know beyond what he is permitted ... Mankind possesses many voices, and together they can provide a partial insight at best. (Kelley 1993, 66)

This interpretation is very possible because the Preacher articulates so well this post-modern perspective on life. Kelley, thus, concludes that this, if true, must mean that "God has never spoken a clear word of revelation that

Campbell: Missions in a post-modern/post-Christian world

man can believe and know with real confidence ... We are fated to be constantly pursuing knowledge but never finally having it." And it would further mean that "the voice of the covenant keeper has no advantage over that of the covenant breaker." Kelley, however, contends that what has led to this understanding is the failure to recognize that it is sin that has brought man to this point of despair, and not his finite creatureliness (Kelley 1993, 66).

The Preacher, on the contrary, is really offering a response to this postmodern world. He presents its position with all the force he could muster, but makes sure to present almost in the same breath a very different perspective. The life of those who have a personal relationship with the Creator is unlike that of those who reject Him totally or who relate to Him on a superficial level, who see Him as the disinterested God – "a *Deus Absconditus*, a hidden god who refuses to permit man any knowledge of the meaning of his life ... and who burdens him with mortality and finitude" (Kelley 1993, 63). Ecclesiastes has to be seen as *part of* Holy Writ. It must not be seen in isolation from God's revealed truth. The writer makes enough statements to affirm that he is aware of God's revelation and that he does not adhere to a worldview that rejects absolutes. Like the psalmist in Psalm 144: 4, the Preacher acknowledges the frailty of man, a frailty that can lead to a sense of futility. The psalmist says, "Man is like a breath or vapor. His days are like a passing shadow." The Preacher agrees and explains further:

For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun. (6: 12)

Without revelation, man's future is a mystery. There is a seeming finality to death, and yet there is uncertainty. Is death really the end? If so, what then, is the purpose of life? One could seek to leave a mark for the next generation. But, the Preacher offers no solace:

One generation goeth and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever... there is no remembrance of the former generations; neither shall there be any remembrance of the latter generations that are to come, among those that shall come after. (1: 4, 11 KJV)

And again:

**As he had come naked from his mother's womb, so will he return as he came.
He will take nothing from the fruit of his [labour] that he can carry in his hand.
(5: 15)**

If your life is limited only to the present and your contributions are not noted by future generations, then on what basis do you hold your actions to be worthwhile? No wonder throughout Ecclesiastes is the recurring: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

All is indeed vanity if there is no God to give meaning to life, either through His non-existence or His distance and disinterest in human affairs. Christians need to be bold enough to say that "if God is not there", they are so committed to truth that they will abandon all – "no more holding on to outward forms" (Schaeffer 1968, 90) – for if life is meaningless, then integrity demands that we do not pretend that there is hope, or morality for that matter. And so, Schaeffer contends, perhaps then we will earn a listening ear. Isn't this what the Teacher did? He presented the case of life without a personal, relational God, and makes it clear what this life would mean. No flowery language about how he would be working for the good of the next generation. His thoughts about leaving his legacy to a generation that did nothing to help him acquire it, is poignant and pointed, as are those about the "shadowy", transient nature of life. The Teacher is honest. He has the integrity of which Schaeffer speaks.

For the Preacher, however, that was not the conclusion of the whole matter. Life for the believer is not in vain. It is important to be aware of the audience to whom he wrote: God's covenant people, the Jews. It means, therefore, that they would be cognizant of these words of the Preacher in another context. The psalmist says man is like a breath but he does not end there. He continues, "Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD (Ps. 144:15). Job himself says he will return naked to his God, but note the thanksgiving that follows: "Blessed be the name of the LORD". (Job 1:22) God is sovereign. It is He Who gives and it is He Who takes life away. He is the One in control. Man's ultimate fate lies in His hand. But it also lies in man's hand, inasmuch as he allows or does not allow God to reign over his life while he is "under the sun." Man is enjoined to fear God a number of times in the book. And in his concluding statements, the Preacher makes it absolutely clear that he is not in a maze going nowhere, moving from futility to hope back to futility in an endless journey. There is purpose and meaning to and in life. There is a God to whom man can relate. He it is who gives this

Campbell: Missions in a post-modern/post-Christian world

meaning to life and so offers hope to man (Eccl. 12). This is the God Christians need to communicate to the world – with integrity.

TO PREACH OR TO CONVERSE

The nature of our communication to the generation in which God has placed us needs to be critically examined. Christians can be very assertive, even aggressive in their proclamation of the gospel. It is the truth, and so is not up for debate. But, how useful is that approach? Does it encourage people of a different viewpoint to listen to us? If we do not listen we should not expect others to listen to us. It means, therefore, that we need to understand our world. The Preacher understood his world so well he expressed its thoughts almost as if they were his own. We cannot keep ourselves so sheltered from the “philosophies” of the world that (1) we become gullible to them when we are forced to contend with them and (2) we are unable to respond to them meaningfully and so give an answer in defense of our faith, an answer that, with the help of God’s Spirit, will produce faith in those who hear it. Paul’s injunction in Colossians 2: 8: “See that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception” has been used by some as an excuse not to listen to the ideas of unbelievers. The injunction, however, has to do with not allowing men’s thoughts to influence us away from God; it is not a warning to avoid grappling with them.

Ronald J. Allen suggests, therefore, that the preacher engages the world and fellow believers in “conversation.” He contends that

the postmodern recognition of perception as inherently interpretive suggests that conversation is an apt way to think of preaching: the sermon is an event in which interpretation takes place through conversation ... By “conversation,” scholars in the field of preaching mean not that the preacher and the congregation engage in out-loud give-and-take, but that the sermon, though monological in form, has the quality of dialogue. (Allen 2001, 36)

The congregation must be able to “identify basic issues and name different interpretive viewpoints” (Allen 2001, 36). And they must also understand the interpretive process. “The conversation is between the gospel (and other aspects of Christian tradition) and elements of the postmodern milieu. The preacher as interpreter is called to help the congregation to engage in mutual critical conversations with elements of [this] milieu”(Allen 2001, 36). Although Allen speaks specifically to preachers, what he says can be extended to the “layman.” It is at the level of the latter that conversation of the truest kind can occur. By having these kinds of conversations with the

congregation, the preacher not only ministers to unbelievers who may be present, but prepares the believers to themselves enter into dialogue with their colleagues, neighbours and friends.

What Allen advocates is what the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes* does. He engages the reader in dialogue: a back and forth, a to and fro that brings out different interpretations of a given situation. The perceived maze through which the Preacher takes the reader/congregation is not only a literary device aimed at showing the confusion of a mind not at rest in God, but is also a means of engaging in the dialogue mentioned above. There are two mindsets, two worldviews contending with each other. In this interchange, the congregation, guided by the Preacher, is brought to the point of understanding why one worldview supersedes the other. At one point, for example, he argues for the vanity of financial or material gain.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity. (5: 10)

Then he presents another perspective:

Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's [labour] in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life. (5: 18)

Then he shows that it is only when God keeps man "occupied with the gladness of his heart" that he "will not consider the years of his life." (5: 20) It is only then that true enjoyment can come because there will no longer be a preoccupation with the fact that upon death he can take nothing with him "from the fruit of his [labour]" (5:15). His preoccupation will be with the Giver, not the gift.

The Preacher also argues for the inadequacy of wisdom (2: 14-16; 8:16-17), and then for the benefits of it (7: 19; 9: 13-18; 10: 12-15). True wisdom comes from God. He contends that injustice goes unchecked (7: 15-17; 8:11), and then makes bold statements that it will be corrected (3: 17; 8:12-13). Ultimate justice comes from God. "Unexplained enigmas, unresolved anomalies, uncorrected injustices – life is full of much that that man cannot comprehend or control" (Zuck, Merrill and Bock 1991, 245). This is the confession of the Preacher. He does not pretend these do not exist. But even as he admits: "Yes there's so much we don't understand; life is seemingly full of contradictions," he points the 'congregation' to faith – not escapism. He shows that he understands the position of the skeptic, but also shows that

Campbell: Missions in a post-modern/post-Christian world

whereas man is finite, God is infinite; whereas man is inadequate, God is the all-sufficient One. This is dialogue. This is conversation.

A modern example of conversation is given by Francis Schaeffer. He recounts an instance where an atheist asked him, "What sense does it make for a man to give his son to the ants, to be killed by the ants, in order to save the ants?" In other words, "Why would God send His Son to be killed by man in order to save man? To this Schaeffer replied that it would make no sense for a man to do that for ants, "because man *as a personality* is totally separated from the ants. Man's only relation to the ants is in the areas of Being and creaturehood." However, man's relationship to God goes beyond these. "The reasonableness of the incarnation, and the reasonableness of communication between God and man turn on this point, that man, as man, is created in the image of God" (Schaeffer 1968, 95).

Any worldview that does not acknowledge that man is made in the image of God actually devalues man. The fullness of our worth is bound up in this fact. And it is this that motivated God to "make the effort" to communicate with us, by speaking our language. "When God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone, or when Jesus spoke to Paul on the Damascus road ... they used a real language subject to grammars and lexicons, a language to be understood" (Schaeffer 1968, 90). This God wants us to communicate through ordinary conversation and/or through conversational preaching that He is willing to reason with postmodern man.

Ours is the challenge as contemporary Christians of forcing the people of our day, be they the average citizen or the intellectual, to think through their presuppositions. Classical apologetics will not help us to meet this challenge.

The use of classical apologetics before [the shift to a pluralistic, post-modern perspective on reality] was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface on the same presuppositions [the presupposition of antithesis, where if one contradictory statement was true the other was false/if one thing was right its opposite was wrong], even if they had an inadequate base for them ... Now, a presuppositional apologetic is imperative ... The Christian must resist the spirit of the world in the form it takes in his own generation. (Schaeffer 1968, 15-18)

Schaeffer's contention is that "historic Christianity stands on a basis of antithesis. Without it historic Christianity is meaningless" (Schaeffer, 15). It means, therefore, that we must not only challenge the content of people's arguments, we must also challenge the basis for it if our message is to be

heard understood and accepted. This is what “presuppositional apologetics” is all about.

As we challenge the basis for positions held, we must be careful to define our terms.

Some commentators are comparing the challenges facing the Western church at this postmodern juncture to what confronted it during the first several centuries of its existence, a time of ferment when its religious vocabulary and grammar were still in its formative stage. Yet the analogy between then and now stumbles over one critical and conspicuous difference. Then, those to whom the message was being proclaimed were hearing it for the first time – both church and world were just learning what it meant to be Christian. (Johnson 2001, 14)

We need to realize that

now, the gospel is being proclaimed to a culture that still retains a distant memory of the grammar of Christian meaning yet does not know what to make of it. Heirs to a long tradition of theological reflection, modern Westerners are now contesting that tradition, from outside the church but also from within ... So radical are the questions being asked today that some religious-minded individuals have donned the label “post-Christian.” Finding they can no longer embrace the church’s traditional vocabulary and grammar, these restless minds have not yet found a vocabulary and grammar of their own ... By default, their strategy is to continue to make use of traditional Christian categories (e.g., God, creation, salvation/liberation), with the hope of infusing them with new meaning. (Johnson 2001, 14-15)

It is imperative that we understand that conversations in a postmodern, post-Christian world is also an exercise in deconstruction.

TO DECONSTRUCT AND TO RELATE

Deconstruction is an analytical tool which “names the ambiguities, consequences, inconsistencies, and contradictions inherent in our world constructions.” In deconstructing reality, one is always questioning and critiquing. It is a never-ending task. This exercise is undertaken because

Postmodernism places into question all modern attempts to render every idea secure by reference to comprehensive, self-evident, and self-legitimizing foundations. All our knowledge is but a fallible, contingent enterprise, an endeavor that is deeply rooted in the purpose of the knower. The proper test for what we take to be true is not whether it achieves a supposed one-for-one correspondence to some ready-made reality but whether it promotes or fails to

Campbell: Missions in a post-modern/post-Christian world

promote, the flourishing of everyday human life. Truth is an event emerging out in front of us – something that needs to be grasped and tested rather than something fixed and stable. It is context-dependent and bound up with a particular language, tradition and history of interpretation. (Johnson 2001, 6)

The result has been “a pervasive cynicism toward the institutions, values and lofty goals of the past” (Johnson 2001, 6). Church traditions, and even the Bible itself are not exempt from this cynicism. The questions raised by post-modernists are quite appropriate. Their rejection of “the assumption that we can possess pure, undistorted knowledge of the world” has merit. The recognition that we are interpreters of the world in which we live is very important even as it relates to the Word of God and our interaction with that world in light of the Word. Indeed, we come to the text of Scripture with pre-understandings, fashioned by our environment. It is important that we admit this. Let us concede where they are right, but let us nonetheless be firm where we are right. That we come to the text with “issues” is not an admission that God has not spoken and spoken with finality. This is the position taken in Ecclesiastes. Indeed man’s knowledge is fallible and contingent. This is the testimony of the Preacher who asserts that all is vanity because of this limited knowledge. All is vanity when one acts only on the basis of this limited knowledge. But this understanding leads him to assert that it is only in knowing the divine – it is only in accepting His revelation that any certainty can be attained – any certainty of the fruitfulness of present action and of the future course of man. He, therefore, posits: “the conclusion when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (12:13). After a discourse on the futility of life as understood from a human perspective, the writer records his conclusion: the key to meaning in life is a relationship with God and an acceptance of His statement on life. As a matter of fact, the acceptance/recognition of the words of the “wise” takes place only as it is in line with the Word of God. “The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails: they are given by one Shepherd” (12:11). Truth is found in God.

This has implications for the Church. She too must engage in deconstruction. We, as Christians, need to examine the inadequacies in our

theological convictions and ethical [behaviours]. Deconstruction can lead a congregation to identify points in its theological world that require further clarification or that need to be rethought or jettisoned. [It] can also unmask hidden assumptions, vested interests, ideologies, and manipulation of

knowledge and power in a congregation, and in the larger world ... [Deconstruction] helps the congregation confront ways in which Christian tradition, the congregation, or some other element of the world is complicit in anti-gospel attitudes and behaviours.” (Allen 2001, 38-9).

Our willingness to do this will witness to our confidence that God has, in fact, spoken and we are subject to His authority, and not mere human reasoning. The Bible is not just a story about God; it is God’s own story. (Allen 2001) This is of significance to a mind that questions all human constructs. The Bible claims to be God-breathed. Human beings were simply the *vehicles* of God’s communication. This is the place to which the conversations we have with this postmodern world must lead.

In addition to affirming by self-examination our commitment to the Word of God, we must challenge postmodernists to deconstruct their own presuppositions. “When pluralists can argue on the one hand that the incarnation is too mysterious to be convincing, and on the other hand that God is so mysterious that he should not be reduced to creeds and confessions that divide human beings up into discrete parties, one begins to suspect that it is not the evidence that is being allowed to speak, but the commitment to pluralism” (Carson 1996, 323). We need to let them see that pluralism is dishonest, not in its rejection of the Christian God, but in its out-of-hand rejection of the possibility of absolute truth, which *may*, in fact, be found in this God and in Him alone. If they can concede this possibility then there will be hope for acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God and ultimately the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. After the presuppositional barrier is broken down, then arguments for the historical reliability of the Scriptures can be made. Carson posits that just as witnesses to the Holocaust could not be expected to “maintain careful neutrality”, the same should apply to the first Christians. “Commitment and theological reflection, i.e., the faith stance of the Evangelists cannot responsibly be used to devalue their testimony” (Carson 1996, 323).

Postmodernists also need to be challenged to admit that any attempt to simply deconstruct or overturn *all* existing structures and constructs is ultimately destructive if there is no replacement for these structures. And, this is where the gospel message is crucial. God has fashioned/is fashioning a world, an age in which deconstruction will be unnecessary and He has made pronouncements that are not open to deconstruction (in that they are absolutes). Heaven and earth will pass away, but His Word abides forever. And so, the Preacher deconstructs and then he reconstructs, for he realizes that there is a God who is in control. He overturns systems, showing their

flaws, but then he shows that God has constructed a system that is without flaw. "I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has so worked that men should fear Him" (3:14).

The conversation with postmodernists does not end, however, with the mutual challenge of deconstructing our respective presuppositions. An examination of the position espoused by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas reveals that one should deconstruct, criticize "structures and conceptual orders in order to determine how it favours some individuals over others." In other words, post-modernism is also concerned about power relationships. This is a moral issue. Although post-modernism's rejection of absolutes results in a shaky foundation for the development of moral sense, it does offer an outlook that itself provides good moral guidance, and is confirmed by God's moral code. Levinas argues very strongly for "action on behalf of the Other."³ He claims: "It is the Other's prior claim upon me that makes me what I am and elicits from me what I ought to do. It is a passion that is prior to any action." Who is the Other? Johnson explains: "The Other [is] understood as anything or anyone that falls outside of my own categories ... The Other is the poor, the weak, the widow, the orphan in our midst." It is, he believes, "a concept with deep biblical resonance" (Johnson 2001, 12),

The Preacher addresses this matter of power relationships and its effect upon the Other. In Eccl. 4: 1, he talks about the tears in the eyes of the poor as they are being oppressed and their sense of aloneness and loneliness. He points out the power struggles that ensue, for "every skill that is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his [neighbour]" (v. 4), and he looks at the issue of corruption at high levels that keeps exploitation in place. "If you see oppression of the poor and denial of righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight, for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them" – this is structural inequality – this is structural sin. But, the Preacher also makes it clear that "it is God, not man, who stands as the final arbiter of man's acts and accomplishments" (3:17; 12: 14).

³ Derrida contends that the only "true gift is one in which the giver does not know that [he/she] is giving and in which the recipient has no awareness at all that anything has been received." (Johnson, 2001, 17) This would, of course, be impossible for an all-knowing God who desires and demands worship, and be highly impractical for human beings. There has to be a place for deliberate, planned, and even coordinated, cooperative action on behalf of the Other.

“Sin” is a word that may not be appreciated in this world, but it is a concept that captures the reality of the human condition. The Bible provides a realistic appraisal of the human condition: human dignity and depravity in tension. Any attempt, therefore, to take care of the needs of the Other without bearing this in mind will only be the bi-product of self-deception. The desire for wholesomeness in community, and the attempts to achieve this, come out of man’s dignity. However, “the Preacher’s concern is to emphasize that the problem of social order lies in a deep-seated perverseness in the heart of man. It is a problem that cannot be eliminated by his attempts to arrange society according to some ideal blueprint. As long as the evil is *in* man, his [endeavour] to realize the ‘good life’ cannot succeed ... Man’s goal of community without God is bound to fall apart, for nothing can eradicate the crookedness in the nature of man himself” (Kelley 1993, 92) – except God Himself.

It will be difficult, if not impossible, to point postmodernists to this God if they show more concern about the Other than we do. It is by “self-giving engagement for the Other, transcending all confessional boundaries, that God’s redemption of the world can become real – even for a postmodern age” (Johnson 2001, 18). Jesus Christ Himself said: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13: 35). And very critically too for those outside of the household of faith – even those who persecute us, for God is gracious to both the good and the bad (Matt 5:44). Both in Matthew and I Peter it is made clear that our good works should point people to God (Matt. 5: 16; 1 Pet. 2: 12). Our acting on behalf of the Other, our neighbour⁴ should lead people to glorify God.

Levinas makes a telling point: “The face to face with the Other is the arena within which relationship with God takes place most fully.” The “foremost commandment” in the Law is this: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”; and the second is like it, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22: 37-39). There is a definite link between relationship with others and relationship with God. Commitment to others, though, must not be at the expense of or be a substitute for commitment to God. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, thought that self-authenticity came through action *pour les autres* i.e., action in regard to others. However, this, in itself, does not give meaning to life. “Remember your Creator!” is the cry of the Preacher. The

⁴ See Jesus’ parable about the good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25-37

younger you are when you do that, the more fulfilling life will be. It is a message worth telling in action.

CONCLUSION

Ecclesiastes does not answer all the issues that arise out of post-modernism. It does not suggest all the possible responses that should be made and how they should be made. That is our responsibility. This is *our* time, not the Preacher's. But *Ecclesiastes* does provide a telling commentary and a telling response to the issues of our day.

The Preacher has challenged us to know our world. He has challenged us to know the Word of God and the God of the Word. Notice the marked difference between his arguments from the perspective of faith and those from the perspective of skepticism. And faith is produced and sustained by the Word of God. Without a firm foundation, we will be "tossed about by every wind of doctrine." And the winds of post-modernism are very strong. Experience *seems* to back them up. They bombard us everyday through television, the theatre, the cinema, literature, art – and the list goes on. It behooves us, therefore, to be prepared on every front.

Ecclesiastes points us to strategy. Conversation. Deconstruction. Relationship.

For there to be true conversation, there needs to be respect for the right of the Other to a viewpoint diametrically opposite to our own. The fact that this may not be reciprocated does not lessen our responsibility to encourage, and, when given the opportunity, to actually engage in conversation. God is interested in saving post-modernists too and for them to reach the crisis of commitment to God, traditional methods will have to be eschewed. Monological, hell-fire preaching, classical apologetics, and the four steps method of witnessing, though still having their place, is hardly appropriate in arresting the attention of post-modernists in a way that not only rouses the emotion, but also engages the mind. For our aim must be the renewing of the mind, leading to transformation.

And what of deconstruction? We need to talk about deconstruction: its benefits and its dangers. Deconstruction is useful, but we cannot afford to deconstruct ad nauseam. Job's experience is instructive – he had faith in God, and when that faith waned, he sought to enter into dialogue with God. He asked serious probing questions as does the Preacher – and he was responsive to God's reply. There lies the difference between Job and many contemporary 'seekers.' For they ask, but they do not listen. They ask, but

they provide the answer, not with the humility that allows for a counter response to which they may acquiesce, but with an arrogance which says “there is no possible rebuttal, because there is no absolute truth. Jesus, for them, then, is a mere man who had some good ideas (for his day). But, He certainly has no claim on their lives. Let’s deconstruct, therefore, to show that we understand the interpretive nature of human constructs. But, let us also point to the God who spoke and still speaks through His Word – even to postmodern man.

God’s revelation of himself to man through human language actually demonstrates His desire to enter into relationship with man. This message must be communicated to post-modernists. God is not “insulated and protected from the fragility and brokenness of the human condition, despite [the] tendency to speak of ‘God’ as an abstract perfection, who neither suffers, nor is moved, nor has any real commerce with the world of danger and death” (Johnson 2001, 7).⁵ This, however, cannot only be communicated by word of mouth. Lifestyle evangelism, though not sufficient in itself is a critical component of our conversation with post-modernists. Jesus’ concern for humanity must be demonstrated in our life. The hope we have in Him must also be attested to in our attitude and actions. “We are not people who must throw up our hands in despair. We must offer the credible alternative in the life we live ... We begin with a sense of our insufficiency ... and then we recognize that there can be no ultimate fulfillment of purpose in life apart from God in Jesus Christ (Taylor, 2003). If this is not realized or recognized then there remains confusion, repeated failures, built-up frustrations and cynicism. But, “if [we] are firmly rooted and grounded” in Christ, “in the midst of chaos [we] still can make sense [of life.]” (Taylor 2003). We must be witnesses of the stability that Christ offers.

The Preacher’s ultimate goal was to witness to the need for relationship with the Creator. This was where his conversation and deconstruction led his readers, his congregation. This too must be our goal.

⁵ Johnson goes too far in his criticism of the Western theological tradition, for in as much as God may have been seen in too abstract a way, to say that His suffering and His identification with broken and frail humanity is not recognized is an exaggeration. In addition, although one should recognize that God is for us and with us, we should never lose sight of the fact that He is transcendent. Without this reality, God would have little control over this world. And that would be just cause for despair.

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