

TEACHING THE GOSPEL

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Reflections On Teaching the Gospel

North American churches are in the midst of an encounter with pluralism in the context of a postmodern age. Immigration has brought people of different ethnicity into the cultural mix, along with those of different faiths. Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist temples, Muslim mosques and non-traditional Christian Churches – Greek and Russian Orthodox, Christian Reform and Mar Thoman, to name a few - co-exist in many urban centers along with the traditional Roman Catholic and ‘mainline’ Protestant Churches. Moreover, as our society has become more multicultural, and tolerant of difference, a host of “New Age” spiritualities have emerged. The mix has become so pluralistic, that in a recent U.S. census some 200 denominations and faith groups were identified.¹

Between 1980 to 2001, traditional Christian churches were in decline. The loss of membership in the Anglican Church of Canada was so significant that the sociologist Reginald Bibby even raised serious concerns about its medium-to-long term viability as an organization – a position that, this writer is happy to note, he has reversed in his most recent, post 9/11, survey reported in his book “Restless Gods”. During those difficult years, the Church hunkered into a defensive posture inside its buildings, concentrating on making those who remained feel better about themselves; but not engaging the larger culture in any meaningful way.

While the Churches were embroiled in their own problems, they missed, for the most part, changes occurring in the society around them that accelerated the very difficulties they were experiencing. The pluralists were saying the same thing the liberal Hindu had been saying

¹ Robert Wuthnow, Christianity in the 21st Century, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24

all along – all religions are of equal value and lead to the same God.² This point of view resulted in the so-called “Copernican Revolution”; a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre, to the thought that God is; and all religions serve and revolve around him. Many members of our society now believe that we must abandon our commitment to Jesus Christ as God’s final revelation, and accept all religious claims on equal terms.³

As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman says: “The main feature ascribed to “postmodernity” is the permanent and irreducible *pluralism* of cultures, communal traditions, ideologies, “forms of life” or “language games”. . . . or awareness and recognition of such pluralism.”⁴ Things which are plural cannot be classified as “right” or “wrong”. In fact, truth is considered to be socially constructed, contingent, inseparable from the peculiar needs and preferences of certain people in a certain time and place. This notion leaves no value, custom, belief or eternal verity untouched.”⁵ The logical extension of postmodernism is nihilism, the effects of which have been poignantly described by Dorothy L. Sayers:

*In the world it calls itself Tolerance; but in hell it is called Despair. It is the accomplice of other sins and their worst punishment. It is the sin which believes nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.*⁶

Douglas Webster summarized the situation succinctly with his comment that both poles of the Protestant continuum (liberal

² Ken Gnanakan, The Pluralistic Predicament, (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 3

³ *ibid*, 11

⁴ Daniel J. Adams, Toward a Theological Understanding of Postmodernism, in *Metanoia*, Summer 1997, (Prague:)

⁵ Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 20

⁶ Groothuis, 170

Protestantism and popular evangelicalism) are being evangelized by the world rather than evangelizing the world.⁷

Postmodernism accelerated the secularization of our society. Indeed, according to George Hunter III, in 1992 there were approximately 120,000,000 secular people in the United States – about 48 percent of the population. About a third of these had no Christian memory; a third had distant Christian memory; and a third were nominal Christians.⁸ The percentage would be even higher in Canada because it is generally acknowledged that we are a more secular society than the United States. As Hunter observed, the first two groups do not even know how to act in church; so visiting one would be an alien experience.⁹ The latter group knows enough of the jargon and routine to pass as Christians, but their lives are driven by the culture's values.

The implications for evangelism are profound. We now live in the mission field. It is no longer somewhere across the sea. The Church is a stranger in a strange land; and the cultural differences between its world and postmodern society are so substantial that Mark Tabb has described the work of evangelism in such a setting as a "Mission to OZ".¹⁰ Denizens of OZ gave up the concept of transcendent, eternal truth long ago. They value experience the way earlier generations valued material wealth; and are not swayed by experts telling them there is more to life than being entertained.¹¹ People of OZ want God, but not traditional religion. They combine all sorts of ideas about gods and deities together to make their own customized lord. They reject traditional roles, gender, sexual identity; and have grown sceptical and suspicious of almost everything.

⁷ Douglas Webster, Evangelizing the Church in Timothy R. Phillips & Dennis L. Okholm, eds., Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 196

⁸ George Hunter III, How to Reach Secular People, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 41.

⁹ Ibid, 42.

¹⁰ Mark A. Tabb, Mission to Oz: reaching postmoderns without losing your way, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 21.

¹¹ Tabb, 19

No one in Oz asks what is true. WHAT IS REAL is the question.¹² Some cultures value truth, others gold; but in the postmodern world, the greatest commodity is experience¹³

This is the setting in which we must teach the Gospel. Many people are largely ignorant about basic Christianity; and unacquainted with the Bible, cannot really understand what we say.¹⁴ Yet, they struggle to make sense of their lives, find meaning and purpose, and make a contribution.¹⁵ They are indifferent to church, and don't differentiate between their feelings about church and their feelings about God.¹⁶ However, they are curious about Christianity and Christians. Secular people have multiple alienations,¹⁷ face the future with anxiety, and feel nobody is in charge.¹⁸ Millions are addicted - to nicotine, food, drugs, work, money, sex, gambling, dependent relationships ...the list goes on.¹⁹ As Hunter says, "Secular people are more reachable through ministries that engage their struggles, felt needs and driving motives²⁰ ...you do not begin effectively by trying to sell the whole Church to secular people."²¹ Mark Ireland adds, "In a postmodern context many enquirers are more interested in experience than in a doctrine, therefore short courses on prayer or personal wholeness may be a better starting point than apologetics."²²

Let us now turn to an examination of the principal available courses for teaching the Gospel through the lens of OZ.

¹² Tabb, 46.

¹³ Ibid, 53.

¹⁴ Hunter, 44-45.

¹⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹⁶ Ibid, 49.

¹⁷ Ibid,.

¹⁸ Ibid, 52.

¹⁹ Ibid, 53.

²⁰ Ibid, 69.

²¹ Ibid, 70.

²² Mike Booker and Mark Ireland, Evangelism, which way now?, (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 39.

An Evaluation of Evangelism Courses

Alpha (starts with Jesus, 15 sessions)

Alpha, billed as being for seekers, new Christians and those who want to brush up on the basics, is perhaps the most widely known evangelism program. It is a strong brand, the McDonalds of evangelism,²³ with easy to use resources, national training conferences and a network of local advisors. It popularized the format of sharing the gospel in a social context – a meal followed by a talk or video, then discussion groups. The experience is enhanced by a weekend away that builds strong relationships. Groups often wish to continue to learn together.

Concerns centre on its underlying evangelical theology, which can be divisive if not sensitively introduced. For example the implementation at St. Paul's Bloor Street went very badly; and a lot of people were hurt and left the church.²⁴ *Alpha* is also criticized for being thin on the sacraments and social ethics; and for its lack of flexibility. Adaptation is not permitted.

Where it has been followed faithfully it works. The benefice of St James Gerrards Cross, which has used *Alpha* since 1994, found 75% of those who attended the courses chose to stay involved within the Church community.²⁵ However, the benefice of Purley found it can burn-out a congregation; and suspended *Alpha* due to a lack of volunteer hosts.²⁶

Emmaus Nurture (starts with God, 15 sessions)

Compared to other courses, *Emmaus* starts a lot earlier and goes a lot deeper. There are three stages - Contact, Nurture and Growth – intended for seekers, beginners and disciples. In fact, there is enough

²³ Booker, 20.

²⁴ The Rev. Jenny Andison, comments made in class Feb 15/07.

²⁵ The Diocese of Oxford, Nurture Courses: Alpha, found at http://www.oxford.anglican.org/evangelism/nurture_courses_alpha.html

²⁶ *ibid*

material for three to four years; but it still has a fifteen-session nurture course at its heart. There is also a *Youth Emmaus* available. Many churches using *Alpha* use *Emmaus Growth* courses as the next step on the journey.

Emmaus' five authors come from a cross-section of Christian traditions, bringing theological breadth to the program. Adaptation is encouraged, and the resource materials can be used in a variety of different settings. *Emmaus* tries to strike a balance between explanation and exploration, supporting a variety of learning styles. There is also liturgical material - rites to mark the different stages of the journey - and information for sponsors. The material is described as being very clear, particularly appropriate for novice group leaders, and non-threatening to those who are very new to the Church.²⁷

Emmaus is much less well known than *Alpha*, and is not a draw on the basis of its name alone. It requires more preparation by the leader, but provides little training or support. It also does not foster relationship building to the same extent since it does not provide for meals or a retreat in the program.

In the Diocese of Oxford, *Emmaus* appears to have been used mostly as a confirmation, adult refresher, or Lenten mission program rather than a course to evangelize the unchurched.²⁸

Christianity Explored (starts with Bible, 15 sessions)

Christianity Explored is consciously modelled on *Alpha* – a meal, followed by a meaty but shorter talk, then small group discussion. Its strength is a strong engagement with the Bible and contemporary culture.

²⁷ Comments of Edwin Clements – United Benefice of Blewbury, Hagbourne and Upton, The Diocese of Oxford, Nurture Courses: Emmaus, found at http://www.oxford.anglican.org/evangelism/nurture_courses_emmaus.html

²⁸ The Diocese of Oxford, Nurture Courses: Emmaus, found at http://www.oxford.anglican.org/evangelism/nurture_courses_emmaus.html

Illustrations are drawn from contemporary films and novels; and some from rugby, which gives a masculine and hearty feel. Video talks are provided for those who cannot deliver their own.

Christianity Explored stresses biblical exposition rather than the Holy Spirit. Its strong emphasis on sin and grace makes it counter-cultural, and for some, a disturbing experience.²⁹ At St. Paul's Bloor Street, it was run with some success, but the language was too strident and did not translate well culturally.³⁰

Start! (starts with enquirer, 6 sessions)

Start!, a six session basic introductory course, was designed to make the Christian faith more accessible to working-class culture.³¹ *Start!* is intended for use in small groups, and is designed to help people think through where they are going in their lives; to learn to ask questions about the Christian faith; to discover the good news of Jesus; and to consider how they want to respond to him. The sessions assume no previous knowledge of anything Christian, and the course is sometimes used pre-*Alpha*, or pre- *Emmaus*.

Start! Is accessible, practical, user-friendly and avoids 'churchy' language. The style is down-to-earth, enjoyable and honest.³² Video presentations in a lively magazine format lead into a Bible passage, activity or group discussion. The underlying Bible study is drawn mostly from Luke's Gospel. The course workbook uses pictures creatively, and is valuable for those from non-book cultures. It is described as being a useful vehicle for urban priority areas and other places where enquirers could be put off Alpha, Emmaus and Christianity Explained because they

²⁹ Booker, 50.

³⁰ The Rev. Jenny Andison, comments made in class Feb 15/07.

³¹ Booker, 52.

³² http://www.oxford.anglican.org/evangelism/nurture_courses_start.html

are too highbrow.³³ By the same token, it can also be seen as very basic, and could seem patronising to a more sophisticated group.

Essence (starts with the individual, six sessions)

Essence aims to start where non-Christians are, with issues that concern them, and values their spiritual experience.³⁴ The concepts explored - The Journey So Far, Within, to a Better World, to Wholeness, to Spirituality, and to the Future - are all recognisable to those familiar with New Age spirituality. *Essence's* objective is to encourage the group members to make a personal journey towards God.³⁵

The six sessions are designed to be an experiential introduction to the Christian faith in a culturally relevant way; taking participants on a journey of self-discovery as they investigate Christian perspectives through different activities. Each session is a blend of biblical material, reflection, and a range of activities such as crafts, meditation, and drawing. Considerable use is made of music, poetry and symbols.

The creator, Methodist Minister Rob Frost, planned *Essence* to be held off church premises, in an informal setting with comfortable seating and low lighting; such as a lounge area in a gym, library or pub. He intends it to be advertised on bulletin boards alongside other New Age series, while making it clear that it is based on Christian Spirituality. The aim is to reach those who would never enter a church. For these reasons, The Diocese of Oxford sees *Essence* working well in a variety of fresh expression contexts; for example: alternative worship communities, café churches, youth churches, and those that arise out of a concern for the community or the local environment.³⁶

Essence's major strength is that it gives people an experience of God, reaching out to those who are currently seeking their own spiritual

³³ Booker, 53

³⁴ Ibid, 177

³⁵ http://www.oxford.anglican.org/evangelism/nurture_courses_essence.html

³⁶ ibid

truth in New Age activities and elsewhere. On the downside, its experiential learning style requires a lot of organizing by the leaders, and some of the language used needs to be made more accessible to a non-Christian culture. St. Paul's Bloor Street found the course to be too touchy-feely to suit their congregation.³⁷

Christianity 101 (starts with the world, 4 sessions)

Christianity 101 was adapted by the Rev. Jenny Andison, of St' Paul's Bloor Street, from the original program developed by Harold Percy. While the four sessions - What's wrong with the world?; Where does Jesus fit in?; Where do I fit in?; and Where do we go from here? - were retained, the stories and illustrations were changed to update the material. Jenny also added material to bolster the theology of the program concerning the Cross and the Resurrection, as well as quotations from scripture.

Christianity 101 is used as a pre-baptism and marriage preparation program, as well as a course in basic Christianity. Enough members of the congregation have gone through it that they are beginning to invite their friends.

Group Investigating God (GIG) (starts with Scripture, unlimited sessions)

A *GIG* is a group investigating God. Focused on God, it is intended to help people learn more about Jesus from the eyewitness reports in the Bible. *GIGs* provide an opportunity for 2 or more people to have a discussion flowing from a passage of Scripture; to be together, ask questions, and talk honestly about their lives. *GIGs* don't require any prior knowledge of, or commitment to, biblical precepts.

Observations

Of the courses summarized above, *Essence* would appear to be the most suitable for use with postmoderns. *Essence* provides the opportunity to explore what is real in an experiential manner as participants on a voyage of self-discovery; rather than as recipients of the

³⁷ The Rev. Jenny Andison, comments made in class Feb 15/07.

truth taught by experts. Moreover, the material is framed to meet them in the experience of their lives here and now, on a micro rather than a macro level. It focuses on their individual journey, not what's wrong with the world. The world's problems are too big to handle for those dealing with a plethora of personal brokennesses, addictions, and alienations.

The other courses, including *Start!* and *Christianity 101*, retain the expert or "telling" model that postmoderns find difficult to accept. Moreover, they present Christianity as an entirety – the whole enchilada all at once – in a take it or leave it manner that postmoderns are apt to find alienating. Without dealing with personal wholeness first they are not ready to listen to expert testimony about what they should do with their lives.

A PROPOSAL FOR AN EVANGELISTIC COURSE

Target Audience

The target audience that I wish to address is the denizens of the downtown business community, centred on the bank towers at King and Bay. For the most part they are Gen-X, with some Generation Y and Boomers thrown into the mix. Many live in the downtown itself, or on its fringes, either in homes in the inner city neighbourhoods, or in the condominiums that are sprouting like mushrooms all over the old City of Toronto. Many live in the Harbourfront area. (The reader may benefit from reference to my church plant proposal, *METANOIA*³⁸, which dealt with a similar demographic in the Harbourfront.) For the most part, they are the quintessential postmoderns - many singles, usually from someplace else originally; married couples are mostly childless; both partners work; many professionals – either corporate or creative; desiring full sensory input; with a strong interest in the arts; with a hunger for fellowship that is high quality and long lasting; looking for reality and

³⁸ Available online at <http://www.nvo.com/bartley>

integrity in personal relationships; looking to establish deep roots to compensate for the transience and fragmentation of the world in which they grew up; and for whom the most trusted endorser is a peer.

Course Design

Of the courses described above, *Essence* would be the one that I would consider using off the shelf for this demographic. It is also the one I would explore modifying. However, I was not able to locate *Essence* in Toronto. Neither it, nor any of the other courses described, are available through the TST libraries or the overall U of T library system. It is also not available through the Anglican Book Store. In my search for a program to give me a starting point in meeting the perceived needs of this demographic on a first contact basis I kept coming back to material I had used before – the small group material *Time for a Checkup*, from Serendipity House³⁹.

Time for a Checkup was designed to be a discipleship program for people seeking physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness through exploring the six dimensions of our lives: Spiritual, Physical, Vocational, Emotional, Relational and Volitional. The first session deals with God's creation. It was intended for use with groups at the growth and development stages of the small group cycle; groups that had already passed through the birth stage and developed community - in other words, groups that were already inculturated into Church, Bible study, worship and prayer. It is a course that I have led previously as a Lenten mission program.

Time for a Checkup has the focus that my study would indicate is suitable for my target demographic – a short course on personal wholeness focusing on their struggles, felt needs and driving motives. The title and concept are catchy and the concept of personal exploration in the context of a covenanted small group is one that would appear to be non-threatening; while meeting the individual's needs to establish

³⁹ James F. Couch, Jr., Lyman Coleman et al. *Time for a Checkup*, (Nashville: Serendipity House Publishers, 2003 ed)

meaningful relationships with others on a deep level. However, modification is necessary to move the course from an intermediate to a first contact level; broadening the appeal to the secular, largely unchurched members of my target demographic.

Considering what revisions would be necessary and appropriate, I found that much of the Serendipity material – particularly the introductory material for each session, and the associated bible passages and study notes – could be retained. I felt that the first session needed recrafting, to change the focus from “God’s Creation” to “What is true wholeness and where is it to be found?” I decided to do so given that my focus is on evangelizing those who have not already heard and accepted the Good News, and who do not yet credit God’s role as meaningful in their lives. I felt that the ice-breakers, and questions for interaction that Serendipity used needed to be tweaked for a more business-based Gen-X audience. I removed the “caring time”(prayer support)” as inappropriate for a group that is not yet there with Christianity, and with each other. Finally, I decided to add new support materials in the form of audio and movie clips to engage a demographic for whom the printed word is not the preferred form of entertainment and communication.

Time for a Checkup as Revised

Course Outline

Session	Subject
Week 1	What is true wholeness and where is it found?
Week 2	Spiritual Dimension
Week 3	Physical Dimension
Week 4	Vocational Dimension
Week 5	Emotional Dimension
Week 6	Relational Dimension
Week 7	Volitional Dimension

SESSION ONE - What is true wholeness and where is it found?

Pause and Dedication

Introduction

Welcome to this group exploring wholeness and purpose in our lives. Together we will be evaluating the different dimensions of who we are in much the same manner as a doctor checks our vital signs when we go for a physical. Our goal is to help each other take whatever steps we need to be whole and to reach our full potential.

Before we begin, I'd like you to just take a few minutes to discuss the questions on this short questionnaire with your neighbour, and then we will discuss the group's expectations and reservations for this course so everyone's needs and concerns are addressed before we begin.....

Ice-Breaker "The Jitters"

People seeking physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness spend billions of dollars each year. We join health clubs and spas to make our bodies fit. Thousands pay plastic surgeons to add and subtract various bits from our bodies. Millions use psychiatrists and psychologists to heal their 'psyches'. We are a nation of people seeking wholeness.

But what is true wholeness and where is it to be found? These are questions that have troubled human beings down through the centuries. Aristotle wrote, "It concerns us to know the purposes we seek in life, for then, like archers aiming at a definite mark, we shall be more likely to attain what we want." Henry David Thoreau was much less optimistic, when he wrote, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

The art, music and literature of today address our search for wholeness. Mick Jagger spoke for many of his generation – and is perhaps relevant even today – when he wailed, "I can't get no satisfaction." Like the title of a popular movie, many have concluded that a lifetime of struggle and discord is "As Good as it Gets."

In this session, we are going to explore our modern condition through the lens of three pieces of music; holding them up as the vehicle to begin our examination of wholeness in our society, and particularly in our own lives.

Discussion

Is That All There Is? – Peggy Lee

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

What's It All About Alfie – Dionne Warwick

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For – U2

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

Comparison and summary of observations and insights arising from the three songs.

Group Covenant

Closure and Pause

SESSION TWO – Spiritual Dimension

Pause and Dedication

Introduction

In last week's session, we focused on the question of "What is true wholeness and where is it found?" We looked at this question through the lens of three pieces of music – *Is That All There is?*, *What's It All About Alfie?* and *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For*. I asked each of you to hold these in mind as you went through the week, and to report your observations back to us as to how the themes they expressed impacted on your life, and those around you. What did you find?

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

This week we will look more specifically at evaluating the spiritual dimension of our lives. We will do so using the lenses of a film clip, *The North Star*, from the movie *Most*, and the story of Nicodemus from the Gospel of John in the Bible. Please remember that we are using the Bible simply as a discussion vehicle ... as the story of people in relationship with each other and with a creator ... as a useful tool to provide a starting point for our discussions with each other, and a self-examination of our own lives. There is no other expectation.

We live in a time considered to be a scientific and technological age. These disciplines can give us certain tools for living, but no direction for living. They can describe what is right in front of us, but they are never meant to search the depths of who we really are. Because we are searching in a society that has long minimized the importance of anything beyond the physical, our hunger is especially intense. Our increased hunger has driven us to seek answers through ways that include astrology, the occult and New Age mysticism. But these avenues have left many confused and spiritually frustrated; wondering if there is not something else that makes sense of it all.

Icebreaker

Discussion

Movie Clip *The North Star*

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

Bible Study – John 3: 1-21

Questions and observations from the group, facilitated by the leader

Comparison and summary of observations and insights

Observation assignment for the week ahead

Closure and Pause

SESSION THREE – to Session Seven

The layout of each of the subsequent sessions will be similar to the first two – an introduction, followed by discussion of illustrated by an example from the secular world held in tension with an example from the Bible, followed by comparison and summary of observations. The intention is to keep things light, allowing the discussion to arise from the class without any preconceived agenda or objective. The role of the leader is seen as facilitating that voyage of self-discovery, wherever it may lead; and promoting interaction and relationship building among the

members of the group. Support materials for subsequent sessions are visualized as being the following:

- a. Session Three - Physical Dimension
 - (1) "You are not God" from *39 Pounds of Love*
 - (2) 1 Corinthians 6: 12-20
- b. Session Four – Vocational Dimension
 - (1) "A Very Tall Person" from *God Grew Tired of Us*
 - (2) Acts 9: 1-29
- c. Session Five – Emotional Dimension
 - (1) The trailer from *Pursuit of Happiness*
 - (2) Ephesians 4: 17-32
- d. Session Six - Relational Dimension
 - (1) The trailer from *Evan Almighty*
 - (2) Matthew 5: 21-26, 43-48
- e. Session 7 – Volitional Dimension
 - (1) "The Work of God" from *Amazing Grace* or "Difficult Decisions" from *Holiday for Love*.
 - (2) Phillipians 3: 4b – 14.

It is recognized that these pairings are not perfect. The movie clips are an initial attempt at appropriate pairings. My intention would be to make extensive use of the movie clip discussions at The Source for Youth Ministry website (<http://www.thesource4ym.com/videoclips/>) to refine the offerings.

It is anticipated that session seven would include a "course evaluation", together with a information and a sign-up list for other felt needs courses offered by Serendipity and others, as well as Emmaus Nurture for those ready to investigate the Christian alternative.

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