



WHY tALK aBOUT pOSTMODERNISM?

jON mIDDENDORF

As members of the Wesleyan tradition, we have conversation and dialogue written into our DNA. We are an unfolding story whose chapters are marked by important dialogues and debates.

Every major move within our maturing faith community has been fueled by a multitude of voices. Often these voices have cooperated and rejected one-sided dictation or monologues. At their best, these conversations have been bathed in prayer and attentive to God's leadership.

There are dangers that come from listening to a multitude of voices. But those dangers highlight our need to rely upon the God who participates and collaborates along with us. We believe that God gently leads and guides along the way.

The books included in our Bible were not selected by an edict issued from one booming voice. Instead, our Bibles emerged through meetings and councils. Consensus was reached after conversations, dialogue, arguments, and even shouting matches.

The Protestant Reformation demonstrated the hunger for partnership and shared responsibility. Passionate believers insisted on the right of the congregation to be involved in the dialogue about faith, the Church, the world, and the nature of God.

John Wesley understood the power of dialogue. Wesley's emphasis on band, society, and class meetings demonstrated his conviction that character was formed in relationship, not in a silent,

conversationless vacuum. He believed that conversation in community really mattered.

Phineas F. Bresee cobbled together varied and disparate faith communities in the hopes of fashioning a critical mass. He and other early leaders hoped to establish a new denomination, wide and broad enough to encompass people of diverse opinions. Many early leaders in the Church of the Nazarene placed a higher premium on community than theological uniformity.

The importance of community is evident in how we in the denomination think about the Bible. We talk about God's working to inspire various writers and God's inspiration for our interpretation. Conversation is present even, or perhaps especially, in how we understand the role of Scripture.

A healthy discussion of any important topic—faith, culture, Church, the nature of God, and so on—requires our involvement. This is more than an opportunity; it's part of our identity. We are “theology by public discourse, theology as public discourse” people.

As those who rely upon conversation and dialogue, we are vulnerable to the same problems that threaten all viable conversations. For instance, we must resist the tendency to allow the loudest and angriest voices to have more influence. We must resist uncharitable interpretations of what others say. But we must not allow these problems to distract us from our calling to continue to discuss our theology.

God is a conversation partner whom we ought to imitate. While God's character and basic dreams for creation never change, God is also dynamic and interactive. God is always ready and willing to move at a moment's notice to reach out to creation. God makes it possible for us to respond.

Shouldn't the Church—the people of God—share God's willingness to move, adjust, and have genuine conversation? Shouldn't we resist the temptation to crystallize our statements of belief in ways that inhibit, stifle, or outlaw exploration and discovery?

Words aren't perfect. They cannot contain all that we might want to say about our infinite God. But words in conversation and dialogue are more likely to produce fruit.

Monologue and dictation can be weapons of violence when in the wrong hands. We live among a generation with an aversion to truth dictated by one, autocratic voice. And one-way discourse heightens the possibility that we will be misunderstood by those whom we most want to help.

Clearly God does not need our protection. God reaches out sometimes despite our words. But honest conversation can generate new discoveries and new possibilities as we listen faithfully to each other and to God's still, small voice.

Religious dictators have fewer blind followers in our postmodern era. Postmodern people have grown up watching the failures of local, national, and international religious leaders. Many today have more faith in gathered wisdom. This wisdom emerges from the synergy between those in conversation.

Postmodern Christians have grown increasingly frustrated by the Church's lack of familiarity with and lack of desire to dialogue with the broader culture. In the spirit of our Wesleyan heritage, these postmodern believers hope that those outside of church walls will be treated as something other than a threat or an enemy.

Many postmodern Christians have a deep desire to reenter neighborhoods, towns, and cities as the people of God. This reentering is not done with a posture that would have us pointing fingers, however. It is a reentering in conversation, with a genuine interest in people and places all too often considered beyond our church walls and responsibility.

Perhaps postmodern Christians can return to an understanding of the phrase "Holiness Tradition" that will release and reenergize them. For too long "holiness" has been a kind of wall keeping us separated from a culture we have deemed inherently evil. But this understanding of holiness not only puts us in danger of losing touch with postmodern believers but also denies our part of what is distinctive about our Wesleyan heritage.

We are called to risk deep and meaningful relationships with the broader culture. We are called to be people of conversation: people who dare to believe that the truth—not limited to what might be "inside" me or you—can be discovered in a dialogue that

allows space and grace for the other. In that kind of dialogue we find that God has been present even before we arrived. And God guides and breathes new life into situations we feared beyond our reach.

Perhaps postmodernism helps us remember that we must enter anew in conversation with others. And this conversation involves both listening and speaking in faith, hope, and love.

Your story: Describe some of the major shifts in your life as a Christian. What impact did these shifts have and how did you handle them?

qUESTIONS

1. Why are some people nervous about any conversations about things theological and spiritual? Like politics, why is religion sometimes a taboo subject among friends and family?
2. Why do Christians have a hard time disagreeing? What does this say about us?
3. A classic tenet within Wesleyan churches has been “on essentials we will agree, on nonessentials we may disagree, but we must always love.” Why is this so hard? What is at stake?
4. Why are some persons nervous about the conversation with the broader culture?

aPPLICATION

In light of this chapter and its topics, how might you act differently? Think differently? Feel differently? Relate differently?