

THE CHALLENGE OF THREE WORLDVIEWS

By Glenn Smith

Author Eddie Gibbs suggests that in America today we see three worldviews at work. He describes these worldviews as *The Traditional Worldview*, *The Modern Worldview*, and *The Postmodern Worldview* (Gibbs 2000:20-27). Before anyone engages in church planting today they must assess the worldview of the people who they are trying to reach. This issue is rarely addressed in most church planting literature. Yet it is crucial to the success and effectiveness of new churches in North America.

The Traditional Worldview

The traditional worldview is rooted in the concept of Christendom. Christendom has been described as the dominion or sovereignty of the Christian religion (Hall, 1997:ix). It began in the 4th century when the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius I established Christianity as the religion of Western society. Our nation was founded by leaders who held to a traditional “Christendom” worldview. This worldview has greatly shaped our country. Many Western Christians hold tenaciously to this worldview. However, Hall argues that this worldview is diminishing, and must diminish for Christianity to thrive in the future (Hall, 1997).

In the traditional world the church held a privileged and prestigious place in society. The largest or most prominent churches in a town were located in the town square or on the main street. Pastors were honored and held in high esteem simply because they were pastors. They were invited to sit on hospital boards and school boards. They were often asked to serve as chaplains to the mayor or within civic organizations. Church buildings were ornate and prestigious in appearance, reflecting the place of church in traditional society. The Bible was an honored and revered book. Its teachings were accepted without question and it was viewed as authoritative. In courtrooms the practice of swearing on the Bible was standard procedure for people bearing witness to the truth. In the African American community the pastor was the most educated, most respected, and most powerful man of that culture. Latinos from traditional Catholic societies held similar values.

For me personally, my early years growing up were in a traditional, Deep South culture. I did not grow up in a truly “Christian” home. My family never attended a church. Yet we considered ourselves Protestants simply because we were not Catholic or Jewish.¹ I learned the Bible in public school. It was the standard practice in our elementary school until I was in 3rd grade to begin the day with a Bible reading, the pledge of allegiance to the flag, and prayer. Our school district employed an evangelical Bible teacher who would come to our elementary school once a week to hold Bible classes for each of the

¹ It was common in those days for schools to ask students their religious preference because everyone was considered either Jewish or some form of Christian. I remember the first time I was asked that question and I did not know how to answer. My friends were answering “Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, etc.” Since we never attended any church, I didn’t think I was any of those. So I went home and asked my mother. She told me that we were Protestant and she explained to me that I was a W.A.S.P.! However, church was never really a part of our lives. This is an example of American Christendom.

grades. Of course that all changed in the mid-60's and that poor Bible teacher was out of a job. But public school was where I learned about Jesus, the Bible, and scripture memory. That was the traditional, Christendom world.

While this description seems foreign to many (if not most) Americans today, many in the church still hold to this worldview. Even outside the church there are older people who have this worldview. Many African American adults have a form of this traditional worldview, as do most Hispanic immigrants and their families. Sometimes church planters attempt to launch new churches to reach a non-traditional population with a core of Christians who still hold to a traditional worldview. This can be a recipe for disaster. However, when church planters try to reach traditional Latinos without sensitivity to their worldview, they can be ineffective as well. In urban centers such as Houston there are a growing number of people from traditional non-Christian (non U.S.) backgrounds (e.g. traditional Asian Buddhists, traditional Eastern Hindus, etc.). While this is certainly not an example of Christendom, it does illustrate various cultural traditions that have to be taken into account in the U.S. culture. Church planters must think missionally and seek to understand the traditions that shape the worldview of people if we are going to effectively communicate the gospel to them.

The Modern Worldview

It would be a misnomer to suggest that “traditional” Americans today are not “modern.” However, modernity has shaped the worldview of many Americans differently than the traditional worldview. Gibbs (Gibbs, 2000), Shenk (Shenk, 1995), and many others refer to this as the modern worldview.

It has been debated as to exactly when modernity began. Some think it began with the invention of moveable type around 1436. Some suggest it began with the Reformation around 1520. Others think the Thirty Years' War in Europe started it, while still others point to the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and even Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* at the end of the 19th century (Toulmin, 1990:5). It is generally agreed that the Age of Reason (also called the Enlightenment) began a new way of thinking which has shaped the modern worldview. This new way of thinking is rooted in self-reliance and human rationality. Einstein's discoveries in physics led to a new way of viewing science and new concepts of the cosmos. This opened the door to modern medicine and continuous innovation. These new discoveries promised a better way of life. Modernity was assumed to be completely good. The influence of modernity has probably been the most significant force behind current society. However, all was not good. Lesslie Newbigin described modernity as “the most pervasive culture of the world and one of the most resistant to the Christian gospel” (Guder, 1998:25).

People with a modern worldview have an extremely high regard for self. Self actualization and the autonomy of self are central themes (Guder, 1998:25-31). Americans have emerged from Christendom and have embraced this view of the modern self, turning them into religious consumers. They view the church as a vendor of religious services and goods (Guder, 1998:84). This perspective is diametrically opposed to the Biblical view of a disciple of Jesus.

Modernity has brought with it an all out assault on the reliability and authority of Scripture. Rationalism has led to higher criticism in Biblical scholarship. This view undermines the credibility and accuracy of the Bible, making it an irrelevant book for the modern person. The emphasis on reason has led to the view that reality is only found in what is seen. That which is unseen (e.g. the spiritual realm) is myth or superstition. This calls into question the very existence of God. In the modern mind there is no place for revelation or the “mystery” of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Gibbs, 2000:22). All of this has led to the marginalization of the church in society. Life has become separated into public and private spheres. Life is compartmentalized into specialized areas resulting in religious faith being reduced to a privatized matter. Christians are expected to “use” their faith like any other “private” self-help resource, but certainly are not to impose their views on the public sphere. Faith is a private matter that does not define truth, but is purely relative to the individual. This compartmentalization and removal of common values has led to the fragmentation of self and family, which has undermined the traditional family and relational structures. Also, the modern world has given way to the rise of secularization, further marginalizing the church and the credibility of Christian belief.

Church planters must research the communities they are trying to reach to discover how strongly the modern worldview exists among its inhabitants. Planters cannot approach these people with the assumption that they respect the pastor, value the church, or trust the Bible. Planters must design their strategies around the uniqueness of the worldview. If they understand the worldview they will know how to contextualize the gospel so as to have maximum impact in communication.

The Postmodern Worldview

A growing number of people in America (particularly younger adults) have become disillusioned with the modern experiment. They reject the idea that modern advancements have all made the world a better place citing such things as world conflict, broken families, the aids epidemic, and the destruction of the environment. They see great harm in the compartmentalization of life and call for a more holistic approach to living. They do not share the optimism of modernity and are often characterized by pessimism, cynicism, and skepticism. Most importantly, they believe that there is an unseen reality, something much bigger and greater than man himself. They seek to discover and experience spirituality, though usually apart from a Christian perspective. This is characteristic of the postmodern worldview.

Most current church planting books and courses were born in modernity. They are reflective of the values and ambitions of the modern person. If church planters take these concepts and strategies into postmodern contexts they will quickly discover not only ineffectiveness, but a response of contempt and angst. Church planters must possess a high degree of self awareness to know how their own worldview has been shaped and how it manifests itself. They must also know the worldview of the people who they are trying to reach.

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