THE RELATIONAL, INCARNATIONAL, AND CONTEXTUAL NATURE OF
POSTMODERN CHRISTIANITY: AN INTEGRATED REVIEW

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The goal of this study is to discuss the views of four authors regarding three common characteristics of postmodern Christianity. The four authors whose books contribute to this paper include David J. Bosch, Keith E. Eitel, Philip Jenkins, and Carl Raschke. The reader will find the bibliographic reference and a short biography of each author in the footnotes. All four authors make contributions to the ongoing task of understanding mission in the postmodern era. This paper will integrate their views on the relational nature, the incarnational nature, and the contextual nature of postmodern Christianity.

The Relational Nature of Postmodern Christianity

Carl Raschke argues that “[r]elational Christianity is postmodern Christianity.”¹ Philip Jenkins points out Christianity is becoming more relational as the forces of globalization are bringing people from a vast array of cultures and religious faiths into close proximity with one another.² While some may be concerned that Christianity may become secularized as Christians begin to form more relationships with

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¹Carl Raschke, GloboChrist: The Great Commission Takes a Postmodern Turn, The Church and Postmodern Culture, ed. James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 20. Raschke is currently the Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver and an adjunct faculty member at the Mars Hill Graduate School in Seattle. He has written many books including The Next Reformation, The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University, Fire and Roses.

²Philip Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 84. Jenkins is currently the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of the Humanities at Pennsylvania State University and a Distinguished Senior Fellow in the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University. He has written many books including The Next Christendom, Jesus Wars, and The Lost History of Christianity.
non-Christians due to this close proximity, Jenkins observes that Christians in the global South remain very conservative on issues such as homosexuality because of the strong beliefs of their Muslim neighbors on this issue.  

The trend of the postmodern Christian witness toward a more relational approach is somewhat paradoxical to the approach of Enlightenment thinkers who, according to Keith E. Eitel, tended to view people more objectively thus “render[ing] humankind empty, with a lack of eternal significance.” In response to the emptiness felt by people in the wake of the Enlightenment, Eitel observes that people began to form a postmodern view of humanity which promotes all aspects of their being instead of simply trying to conform them to some logical construct. By taking this new view to humanity, postmodernists began to emphasize the importance of community which led to the formation of a more communal approach to others. This communal approach involves mutual respect between people and a willingness to reconsider traditional thought constructs.

One challenge to a traditional thought among Christians in the West who stress individualism is found in Bosch’s contention that “righteousness of God” should be perceived as a “gift to the community” and not as a gift to the individual because “the

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3Ibid.

4Keith E. Eitel, Paradigm Wars, 67. Eitel currently serves as a Professor of Missions, Director of the World Missions Center, and Dean of the Roy Fish School of Evangelism and Missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Besides his service as a missionary to West Africa, Eitel has pastured many churches and written quite a few articles covered various issues confronting the study of missions.

5Ibid., 67.

6Ibid.
individual believer does not exist in isolation.” While some Western Christians may react to Bosch with concerns about personal holiness, one must consider the lack of personal accountability among Christians caused by individualization, privatization, and isolation that occur when the individual is exalted over the community. By interacting with all members of society, Christians may be able to rekindle what Bosch calls “the revolutionary nature of the early Christian mission [which] manifested itself . . . in the new relationships that came into being in the community.”

Just as community eroded in the West due to the Enlightenment, the relational dynamics that had spread Christianity so effectively in the New Testament era also began to dissipate. Postmodern Christianity, if it is to be effective in mission, must renew the relational bonds it has with society not simply through evangelical proclamation but also social ministries that serve the needs of widows, prisoners, and other members of society. According to Raschke, postmodern missionaries, unlike their predecessors, are using a more relational approach on the mission field which affirms the indigenous culture. This approach seems to be necessary in the global South, because as Jenkins observes, people in the global South place a strong emphasis on community and less emphasis on

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7Ibid.

8David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology, Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), xiii, 166. Bosch (1929-1992) was a Protestant missiologist who served as a missionary in Transkei from 1957 to 1971. He served as a professor of missiology at the University of South Africa from 1971 and was the dean of theology from 1974 to 1977 and from 1981 to 1987. He also served as the general secretary of the Southern African Missiological Society as well as editor of the society’s journal Missionalia. Bosch was the national chairman of the South African Christian Leadership Assembly during 1979 and chairman of the National Initiative for Reconciliation from 1989.

9Ibid., 48.

the individual. While this may be the case in the global South, one must ask whether or not Christianity in the West is to become more relational in the postmodern era.

Raschke, who seems to echo the viewpoint of many postmodernists, is wary of those Christians who focus too heavily on doctrines while at the same time neglecting the application of those truths to their actions and behaviors. Christianity, Raschke would argue, must no longer supply the world just with “truth that stands by itself” because the postmodernist, unlike the modernist, gives little credence to logical arguments based on propositional truths; rather, postmodernists want to experience the truths of Christianity in their relationship with active Christians who are living out their beliefs. Commenting on the “pivotal role” that Christian leaders in Africa have played in recent times, Jenkins observes the willingness to engage the social issues “actually enhanced the prestige and influence of churches and Christian leaders.”

The Incarnational Nature of Postmodern Christianity

Raschke believes that postmodern Christianity is incarnational. While many Christians regard the Great Commission as a directive from God telling all Christians to engage in evangelism, Raschke understands the Great Commission as a postmodern call to all Christians to become Christ to the world. He writes, “The Great Commission . . .

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12Raschke, GloboChrist, 117-18.
13Ibid., 118.
14Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity, 142.
15Raschke, GloboChrist, 46.
rests upon the great postmodern proposition—the ‘with’ of divine relation as contrasted with the ‘is’ of doctrinal propositions.”

Throughout the modern era, the Great Commission, at least in the West, was seen primarily as a call to convert non-believers to the faith. Bosch, however, argues that conversion should not be seen simply as an act confined to a particular place and time but as a lifestyle that incorporates an incarnational witness through both word and deeds. Despite his emphasis on the responsibility of Christians to serve their communities, Bosch still maintains that the primary responsibility of the Church is evangelism. Even so, he regards evangelism as inseparable with the incarnational witness (through social action) because service produces a powerful Christian witness among non-believers.

The incarnational approach to mission in the postmodern era, Raschke argues, may require churches to do away with their traditional structures and methods as their primary means of doing mission by supplanting them with Christ-filled believers who actively engage people in their daily life outside the walls of the church. Regardless of structures and methods employed, Bosch calls on Christians to follow Christ’s example of focusing on people by serving them as opposed to maintaining “rules and rituals” and “ruling over them” with divine truths. Bosch, in effect, is calling for a moratorium on

16Ibid., 48.
18Ibid., 404.
19Ibid., 414.
20Raschke, *GloboChrist*, 63.
the view that discipleship is a matter of education; instead, he contends that discipleship is a way of life and that life is one of service.\textsuperscript{22}

To engage people effectively in the postmodern era, incarnational witnesses, according to Jenkins, must do away with presuppositions that originate from their own cultural heritage and be willing to take the revealed truths of Scripture into a new culture. In Africa, for example, Jenkins comments on the importance of giving spiritual solutions to common health problems and not just medical solutions.\textsuperscript{23} Raschke, like Jenkins, believes that “[B]eing Jesus” to others by removing one’s culture from the evangelical witness and model Christ to others is the essence of the postmodern Christian witness.\textsuperscript{24} This postmodern witness, while modeling Christ to others and serving their needs, may be in danger of placing too little importance on the verbal content of the Christian witness because people in the postmodern era are often quite comfortable with those who have different views so long as they do not express them verbally.\textsuperscript{25}

Postmodern Christians may simply find it far easier to live out the Christian faith instead of verbally communicating the gospel even when non-Christians are most open to hearing a verbal proclamation. This non-confrontational method for evangelism, in its apparent concern for postmodern intricacies, seems to ignore the example of Christ and His apostles who sometimes offended people’s sensibilities and comfort zones when they engaged people with the truth. Raschke correctly points out that Christian witnesses,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 38.
\item \textsuperscript{23}Jenkins, \textit{The New Faces of Christianity}, 103.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Raschke, \textit{GloboChrist}, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Ibid.
\end{itemize}
like the Apostles, are charged with delivering an incarnate witness to the Christian faith; however, these incarnate witnesses must also be willing to engage the world even when the world becomes offended by their message. Eitel supports Raschke’s contention that missionaries must be incarnational witnesses who learn and listen to those whom they are trying to convert; however, he places this willingness to learn and listen alongside of the Christian responsibility to communicate the Gospel verbally.\textsuperscript{26} While Raschke seems to view incarnational Christianity as a product of postmodernism that was largely absent from the Enlightenment era, Eitel notes that the Gospel Missioners were living and promoting an incarnational approach to mission in the late 19th century.\textsuperscript{27}

**The Contextual Nature of Postmodern Christianity**

Eitel, in his attempt to draw parallels from history with current trends in mission, notes several attempts to contextualize the Christian message by the enlightened few in the modern era long before the postmodern world began to embrace the importance of contextualization. He explains that Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803-1851) developed and implemented a mission strategy in China where the Gospel was presented in the native language by Chinese themselves.\textsuperscript{28} Bosch also identifies the Moravians as early pioneers in the contextualization of mission by observing that the

\textsuperscript{26}Eitel, *Paradigm Wars*, 69.

\textsuperscript{27}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 1, 35-37. Eitel comments that J. Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) and Tarleton Perry Crawford (1821-1902) were both influenced by Gützlaff. Hudson shocked many of European contemporaries by his willingness to go so far as to dress and wear his hair like the Chinese.
Moravians were known to wear the clothing of the local people as well as adjust their living habits to the local standard.  

These early attempts to indigenize the faith may not have been widespread, but they did begin the process of developing the contextualized approach to mission that has been more commonplace in the postmodern era. Throughout his work, Eitel uncovers the attempts by proponents of the Gospel Mission Movement to lead the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention toward a more contextualized approach to mission; unfortunately, the FMB in the late 1800s throughout much of the 1900s was unwilling to embrace their recommendations. Bureaucracies, like the FMB, may once again become antagonistic to contextualized mission should history repeat itself unless steps are taken to overcome the disconnect between the sending culture and receptor culture.

While Eitel affirms that the FMB eventually changed its position by becoming more open to contextualized missions, one is still left to ponder two very important questions. First, why did it take so long for the FMB to recognize the importance of culture in the task of mission? Second, who are the present day Gospel Missioners and are their voices being heard? While the second question may require the hindsight of the next generation, Bosch identifies feelings of cultural superiority as a possible answer to

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29 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 287.
30 Eitel, *Paradigm Wars*, 113-14. Eitel discovers that many of the proposals of the Gospel Missioners were finally embraced by the FMB through the formation of the Cooperative Services International.
the first question. He argues that these feelings arose from the “feelings of religious superiority” common to many Western Christians over the few centuries.31

While Bosch may be correct about the feelings of some past missionaries, it does not follow that one who believes in the superiority of their religion automatically feels culturally superior as well. Even so, missionaries should be trained to identify the cultural aspects of their faith praxis and be led to view these aspects as absolutely nonessential to their missionary task. By learning to devalue the cultural baggage of their own faith praxis, missionaries may be more able to approach their target cultures with the Gospel exalted and not their own cultures. This goal, one must admit, will always be somewhat elusive, because, as Bosch observes, “the gospel always comes to people in cultural robes.”32

To help remove these “cultural robes,” Raschke argues that contextualization should be the outcome of true dialogue between Christians and non-believers whereby the Christian sets “aside [their] assumptions about what others need—or what [they] think they need—even if what [Christians] think has solid underpinnings.”33 This dialogue, Bosch warns, “presupposes commitment” because dialogue without integrity regarding one’s position on a given issue “becomes mere chatter.”34 Raschke agrees with Bosch that Christians should neither set aside their beliefs nor should they view their truth claims as equivalent to non-Christian truth claims; rather, Raschke simply wants

31Bosch, Transforming Mission, 291.
32Ibid., 297.
33Raschke, GloboChrist, 55.
34Bosch, Transforming Mission, 484.
Christians to approach non-believers as a people loved by God and listen to their perspectives so as to understand how best to communicate the Christian message in such a way that the message will be heard.

Jenkins takes the dialogue between Christians and potential converts one step further by arguing that “[c]onversion need not mean abandoning one’s old faith as false.” While Jenkins may not be advocating that Christians should embrace opposing views found in other faiths, he certainly neglects to warn his readers of the dangers of allowing one’s faith to become relative so as to appeal to those of other faiths. Raschke asks a timely question for all postmodern Christians to consider in their efforts to contextualize, “How can [Christians] indigenize without relativizing?” This question is a common concern for Christians wishing to contextualize the gospel without falling into the trap of syncretism.

While there are many aspects of Christianity that are influenced by culture, Christians must not allow the biblical message to have its meaning altered. Such a mistake is being made, according to Jenkins, by some Anglicans in America who support homosexuality because they “place scriptural injunctions in a contemporary social and cultural context.” This example reveals the dangers of allowing the cultural context to interfere with one’s hermeneutics.

36 Raschke, GloboChrist, 55.
Bosch identifies a lack of critical sincerity among some Christians both in the West and the global South as a major cause for the proliferation of relativism.\textsuperscript{38} Jenkins, however, seems to view the contextual hermeneutic of Christians in the global South much more favorably. He argues that these Christians typically have a “more literal interpretation of [S]cripture” because their extreme poverty and suffering places them in a culture that is similar to the culture of the Bible.\textsuperscript{39} Because of the desperate conditions, Jenkins observes that many Christians in the global South have embraced the Prosperity Gospel.\textsuperscript{40} While many conservative evangelicals in the West reject the Prosperity Gospel, they may need to reconsider the heart of this hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures in light of the culture in the global South. While some Christians in the West may embrace the Prosperity Gospel with a sort of materialistic greed, Christians in the global South may be simply trusting God to bless with the bare essentials.

Contextual theologies, like the Prosperity Gospel and Liberation Theology, may have their excesses, but these theologies also have the potential to challenge the contextual elements of other hermeneutical approaches. For example, Jenkins points out that many Christians in the global South embrace the Scriptures that deal with healing and exorcism.\textsuperscript{41} This cultural perception of a definite spiritual reality was common in the New Testament era according to Bosch.\textsuperscript{42} Unlike these believers, Western Christians tend

\textsuperscript{38}Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 427.
\textsuperscript{39}Jenkins, \textit{The New Faces of Christianity}, 5, 68.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 98-99.
\textsuperscript{42}Bosch, \textit{Transforming Mission}, 48.
to gravitate toward the modernist view which embraces objectivity and rejects the idea that supernatural causes may be at work in one’s daily life. Jenkins expresses his concern that the unwillingness of many Western Christians to believe in the demonic may render “doctrines such as salvation and redemption” less meaningful. The lack of an immediate sense of the presence of evil may leave Western Christians less focused on the spiritual side of life; conversely, such a sense, when embraced fully, may cause one to become overly excessive by attributing too broad a range of events to the demonic.

Conclusion

To conclude this integrated review, it is important that the reader discover the growing interest among postmodern Christians in the person for whom Christ died. Postmodern Christianity, as these authors demonstrate, is developing and promoting an incarnational model for mission that respects both the cultural dispositions and the relational needs of individuals. Whereas Christians in the Enlightenment era focused heavily on the truths being propounded and less on the individual to whom those truths were being delivered, postmodern Christians run the risk of being oversensitive to the cultural and relational aspects of people that they fail to deliver the truth when opposition mounts. Hopefully, further study of Christianity in the postmodern context will help Christians maintain a strong biblical and incarnational witness that shows respect for non-Christians and an appreciation for their cultural differences.

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43 Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity, 184.