

James Thwaites : The Church beyond the congregation

The strategic role of the church in the postmodern era

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The church needs to move beyond its present focus on the congregation, and equip itself to be the body of Christ in all areas of life and work. He argues that if we restore a Hebrew, creation-centred worldview as opposed to the narrower Greek worldview we have superimposed, we will engage effectively with a postmodern society.

Thesis of the book is that the Greek worldview which pervaded early Christianity has encouraged the church to focus on what goes on within itself, and to remain much more narrow than it would have been had it adhered to the more holistic Hebrew world view. He suggests that postmodernism gives the church the opportunity to break free from its rather straitjacketed, compartmentalised thinking and to realise that the major part of its life and witness should go on not in the church building on Sundays, but in the lives of the members in their homes and workplaces from Monday to Friday. We should be releasing them from their obligations to support the church, to attend its meetings, and encouraging them to believe that their calling is to where they already are – in the world.

He demonstrates this well, with short fictional tales of the struggles faced by people as they experience the tension between competing demands of church and home/work, but he overdoes the Hebrew world view part, and some of his interpretation of the Bible to support his thesis goes further than the text seems to warrant. Some of the most challenging parts are the simplest – taking a single verse and showing how it reads differently with Greek or Hebrew spectacles on. Helpful for those who have tended to assume that the church's programme is what the kingdom of God is all about.

I : The Landscape

Where does our current thinking and church structure come from?

1. *The Church Landscape*

Some believe revival will look different from that experience by Wesley, Whitefield and Finney; that the present work of the Spirit in renewal and revival is meant to accomplish much more than filling meetings with people. 'The postmodern period gives the Christian and the church the ability to come out from under centuries of Greek influence and take hold of the worldview God intended us to have all along', 5. It's the vision of life carried by both Jesus and Paul. The Greek worldview divides the spiritual realm from the created realm; the Hebrew worldview unites them.

2. *Where have we come from?*

The early Church Fathers were mostly Gentile converts, steeped in Greek thinking/philosophy. Plato was their favourite. They drew on the Greek philosophical world view to make Christianity accessible to the West; but the result was that the church became more Greek than Hebrew in its worldview. We won the battle but lost the war. Key Greek 'moments' – Aquinas, Renaissance, Enlightenment.

Secular humanity came of age in the modern period; but postmodernism has shattered the modern world view. The most cohesive and uniform thing about postmodernism is its very *lack* of cohesion and uniformity.

For postmoderns, 'knowledge cannot be merely objective... because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational and personal' (Grenz), p.23. The church, on the other hand, has difficulty defining the nature of the spiritual and created realms apart from the grid of Greek thinking. We divide things.

3. *Three cries and the new creation*

'Do Christians do anything else but meet?' The Jesus she had come to know was expansive and life-encompassing; the local church was turning out to be neither. The first Christians couldn't locate the church in a building – they didn't have one. The setting for the life of the church was the entire city/region. It's mostly from the church building that the split universe is expressed. It's not doing us any good and it's not attracting the unchurched tribes heading into the diverse and desperate postmodern mosaic of the C21st.

4. Enter the new creation

Postmodernism is not a fad, but rather the overthrow of a philosophical system that first appeared almost 2,500 years ago. We are being given a unique and divine opportunity to change the way we as saints see into and engage reality. We need to move from transcendence to immanence.

II : The Worldview

The Hebrew worldview

5. The Hebrew vision

He believes the things God taught the Hebrews in relation to the structure/nature of creation were meant to make it across the cultural border and arrive in the Gentile church.

Heavens and earth exist in space/time relationship with each other. We see reality in relation to a higher realm, where God is. Heaven is not dislocated from life and available only after death; it is the culmination and ultimate destination for our present life in creation.

Many Bible verses have been supplanted by the Greek mindset – eg Col 3.2, set your mind on things above, not on things on earth – this doesn't mean what Plato meant; it means we are to turn from things which prevent us from growing up towards heaven – immorality, impurity, evil desire.

6. God – in, through and over all things

Romans 1.20, through the things he has made. The realms of spiritual and created are not meant to be discontinuous. The spiritual realm was just the unseen part of reality. For the Hebrew, God was in and through and over all creation. The Hebrew values not information/knowledge, but wisdom – not the same. The humanist worldview leaves no scope for the soul to breathe the infinite.

7. The Son of God, the Father and the Creation

If we separate our life into the spiritual and the secular, we are in trouble.

All of creation exists in the Son (Col 1.17). He exists therefore in it. God's nature, attributes and power are included in all things. The Hebrews who wrote the NT saw the revelation of the Son of God coming from his life in the eternal Father into the immanence of the third heaven, right down through and into all of creation.

8. The Garden and the eternal purpose

Perhaps hide and seek is part of the pattern God intended – creation is always present, the Word comes only in the cool of the day.

9. The Son comes in

Futility is part of the created order. It calls us through the pain of childbirth to an eternal inheritance. Suffering has to be recognised and embraced, rather than rejected as dissonant. Rom 8.17.

10. Brief snapshot of the Hebrew worldview

The Hebrew universe was divided into heaven, earth, Sheol.

III : The Strategy

Application of the Hebrew worldview to Christian life and church strategy

11. Jesus Christ – the Church – the Plan

The church is meant to be the people of God living and impacting in and through the spheres of creation – work, family, marriage.

12. The restoration of all things

Mk 9.12. He believes that the restoration of all things refers to the process whereby the body of Christ comes to occupy the unseen spheres of creation – marriage, family, work.

13. The divine strategy

Ephesus.

- Phase 1 : preach, make converts, stir up, move on (Acts 19).
- Phase 2: what happens between Eph 4 and 6 – body of Christ, occupying the heavens.
- Phase 3 : 1 Tim 2.1-4 – praying for the leaders of the city. Victory now arises from within the city.

15. The church as pillar meets the church as fullness

The plan from Ephesus is the one we need. The local church can't reach the heavens through words, programmes, meetings. Only through life. The church tends to sell a product – but it isn't meant to live in a distinct sphere of creation; it's the fullness of all the spheres. The result of selling a product and occupying a niche is that churches become entertainment centres; or educational and personal development institutions; or governments over the lives of their citizens; or health centres. The church has established itself in a sphere of creation uncreated by God. It's meant to relate to the whole lot.

16. When revival comes

Jesus said we would only ever win from within, influencing, leavening, growing and overcoming through our lives and our works. Revival doesn't of itself usher in long-term restoration of the city/region – cp Welsh revival, which came and went within 2 years. Evangelism without structure leads to a transient revival – contrast Wesley, with the careful structuring of revival which led to its long-term influence. Revival must be managed apostolically, not evangelistically. Leaders must decide how to diversify the focus of the saints from meetings into real life. Otherwise people will reject the revival – not God, but the patterns it was first expressed in. Paul envisaged three stages:

- Revival
- Maturity
- Restoration harvest in the city/region

IV : The Work

The nature and purpose of our work, paid and unpaid. The daily life of the saints will become the frontline of our engagement with society; it's relatively overlooked at the moment.

17. All things work together for good

We have allowed work and religion to become separate departments of life. Result: loss of interest in something which seems to be unconcerned with 9/10ths of our lives; and lack of impact on society.

Romans 1 describes where it went wrong. Romans 6-8 describes it coming right again. NT centres on our works as the purpose of our lives on earth. Eg 2 Tim 3.17; Eph 4.12; Mt 5.16

18. All the saints' work is good work

Church teaches that the real work is done in church. Not meant to be so. The real work is done in the world. Paid work is good work! Because it's paid we tend to assume it's somehow less virtuous than unpaid work. But it's essential to the divine plan.

19. Restoring the creation spheres engaged by work

How can we transform paid work from a responsibility to a discovery zone?

Work systems include government, health, education, business, recreation. We know that God is hidden in all the things of creation, that his glory is concealed so that we might reach out towards it, that the Fall has overlaid creation with suffering and toil, that Christ's suffering opens the path back up again, that Christ stands in the created order and God's purposes are to be found there.

20. Good food served on the best tables

When we see God as being in, through, and over all things, our fellowship with him at work depends, and our live and relationships impact more strongly on the environment we work within – even waiting at table.

21. Bringing it all back home

From our local expressions, the household of God will become a clan then a tribe. Then a culture.