

A POSTMODERN VIEW OF DISCIPLESHIP

By Eric Zuelke

Postmoderns believe that “We can’t totally know”— meaning that all knowledge is contextual. Moderns believe only in what can be proven by science, and premoderns believe in the supernatural. This Car Talk will look at discipleship in a postmodern world.

What is discipleship? Discipleship is a sister to evangelism. Evangelism is telling people about Jesus, and discipleship is actually getting with a person, studying the Bible together, teaching them theology, and learning what it means to follow Jesus in our daily lives. It can include trying to get a person to attend church or get involved with a youth group.

There is a quote that says: “Preach the word of God; if you must, use words.” This quote is illustrated well by a story as told by Rudy Carrasco in Tony Jones’ book, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*:

Tony emphasizes how to teach discipleship. Alongside this must come modeling a disciple’s life. This task is crucial in urban areas when it comes to racism. Many young African Americans and Latinos are daily the targets of racial prejudice. In following Christ more closely, issues of race are ever-present. They ask hard, painful questions. But mostly they watch to see how leaders deal with racism. Derek Perkins is an African American, and I am Latino. Together we run an urban youth ministry. We asked one of our students – an African American young man who’s recognized in our community as a racial peacemaker – how he learned to be a reconciler. I expected him to talk about Bible studies, prayer times, and history lessons. But this is what he said: “I saw people like you and Derek not just trying to help your own people, but treating both African Americans and Latinos the same. I remember the meetings with you and Derek where neither of you took sides on the issues of race, when we youth were clearly divided along racial lines. The way y’all fixed it made sense.” His response stopped me cold – all that time he had paid attention to what we did and said, not what we taught. From him I learned that, yes, we teach discipleship, but the greatest impact on young people may be what they catch on their own.¹

Today’s youth long for authenticity. Youth don’t want a sugar-coated Jesus. They want the real thing—the full-blown truth. Postmodern churches must be authentic and show a God who is transcendent if they are going to connect with youth today. Tony suggests that inviting youth into the body of Christ is the postmodern way to evangelize. This invitation also needs to be authentic—you can’t invite kids to a pizza party and then start a Bible study when they get there. If you want to do a Bible study as part of the party, let youth know ahead of time. That way they know what is coming and you still have their trust.

An important part of discipleship is teaching what it means to follow Jesus. Finding teaching materials and curriculum can be a big challenge. Sometimes it’s tempting to use what’s been used in the past, or whatever appears easy to do. Teachers and youth group leaders find themselves pressed for time, and may settle for lessons that take the least amount of preparation on their part.

Doug Pagitt says this in Tony Jones’ book, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*: “We need to be careful

not to simply try to revive the faith expressions of the past. Rather we must move from the past – but still fully connected to it – into the future. Youth workers should never settle for simply reliving the past expressions of faith, regardless of how old it is. We need to follow the Christian model and express the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus in our day. God allows us to, and the gospel compels us to.²

Whether you are revising past curriculum or looking for new materials that communicate our Anabaptist theology, it is important that there are opportunities for youth to do activities in groups. Postmoderns aren't too keen on individualism. They want to do things in groups, with their peers. At the same time, youth also need to have times when they reflect by themselves.

To be a youth pastor or youth leader takes a lot of commitment. You have to remember, first and foremost, that you are doing this for God. It's not about you and how good you are at relating to youth. It's all about God using you. Youth in today's society need caring adults whom they can trust. You can be that adult.

¹ Qtd. In Jones 176.

² Qtd. In Jones 190.

WORKS CITED:

Jones, Tony. *Postmodern Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Youth Specialties Books, 2001.