

POSTMODERNISM (and Modernism) IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

(Chapter 5: Lessons for the Church)

Now that we have surveyed modernism and the way it has shaped the church, and explored some of the insights and dangers of postmodernism, we are ready to ask what lessons we can draw for the church in an increasingly postmodern culture. While the church's claim to find universal truth in Jesus runs counter to some postmodern sentiments, is our only option to condemn anything with even a hint of postmodernism and pretend that we can treat knowledge and faith like we did in 1850? Much of the Evangelical church does indeed take that approach.

I would contend that the church has much to learn from postmodernism. We can accept its valid insights without accepting the sort of "hard" postmodernism that is incompatible with the gospel. As we do so, we can learn how to better represent Jesus to those in our postmodern culture. Many of the "third way" approaches mentioned in Chapter 4 apply fairly directly; below we will look at some specific lessons for the church.

No "One Size Fits All"

The pluralism of our world is inescapable; the church can no longer assume that all people think or relate in the same way. Every cultural context is different, every individual's perspective is different, and every grouping of people is different. Therefore, every expression of the gospel and every church community should be at least a little different, reflecting the perspectives and situations of its people and of its neighbors as it seeks to be faithful in its particular context. In order to reach our diverse world, we need a diversity of witness, not a system (like some modern discipleship programs) that aims to produce "cookie-cutter" Christians.

This does not mean that there is no universal core to be shared by all churches and Christians. Following the crucified and resurrected Jesus is essential to any faith that calls itself Christian. However, the variety of human contexts means that there must be latitude beyond that core to express the faith in ways appropriate for each situation. As an analogy, all humans need food with some basic nutritional requirements, but the varied situations of communities and individuals means that each diet will be a little different. Attempts to impose identical ways of following Jesus on all make no more sense than making everybody in the world eat identical diets.

The Church's One Foundation

We saw in Chapter 2 how both the conservative and liberal wings of the modern church have followed the Enlightenment in embracing foundationalism. For the fundamentalists and those influenced by them, the foundation for knowledge and life became an idealized (and idolized) Bible, evidently perfect by Enlightenment standards (the term commonly used is "inerrant"). For the liberal "modernists" of the early 20th Century, the foundation for religion was universal human experience and reason (they did not invent this approach; we see it in earlier Enlightenment figures like Thomas Jefferson).

If there is one thing we have learned in the past 100 years or so, it is that Enlightenment-style foundations cannot bear the weight imposed on them. For all its value, the Bible is not the sort of book the Enlightenment demands. For all that humanity has in common, the variety of

human perspectives and cultures means that no certain foundation can be found there either. Both the fundamentalists and the modernists of 100 years ago were building their houses upon sand. The failure of this type of foundationalism should not be lamented, however; instead it offers the church an opportunity to return to its true foundation, which is Jesus.

The Bible tells us what is truly foundational: *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ* (I Cor. 3:11).¹ Such a foundation, since it is not universally self-evident, does not meet the criteria of Enlightenment philosophy. So much the worse for Enlightenment philosophy. Other metaphors are available for those who don't like the language of foundations; we might think of Jesus as the basic anchor point for our web of belief, or as the center of our coherent view of the world. There are many good reasons for insisting that Jesus be the absolute foundation of the Christian faith, not least of which is that to do otherwise is idolatrous. Perhaps postmodern recognition that other foundations are unworkable can nudge the church toward where it should be anyway, looking to Jesus as its center.

Our Non-modern Bible

We saw in Chapter 2 how the church, especially in its fundamentalist forms, has tried to force the Bible into a modern mold. It is insisted that the Bible be a perfect book, where perfection is defined by Enlightenment standards that would have been quite foreign to the Biblical writers. The Bible is treated as a collection of propositions and instructions, to be mined for doctrine in order to construct a science-like system.

There are many problems with such an approach, but perhaps the most obvious is that it tends to forget that, while the Bible was in some sense written for us, it was not written to us. Given the pre-modern context of the Biblical writers and their original audience, it is foolish to read the Bible as though it were some modern philosophical discourse or science text. If we impose our modern perspectives and expectations on the text before we even begin to read it, we are likely to misread it.

Of course if we affirm the inspiration of Scripture, we have to allow that God could have inspired an Enlightenment-style Bible. The only way to settle the question of how God did things is to look at the Bible we actually have. When we do that, we find a very non-modern collection of writings. We see a few things expressed as logical propositions, but much more material in a variety of other genres, often communicating in figurative terms. We see some (mostly minor) contradictions, and many cases where stories are told in different ways from different perspectives. When the natural world is mentioned, instead of modern science we find concepts corresponding to the (pre-)scientific cultures of the writers, many of which (like the solid dome holding back the waters above in Gen. 1) we now know to be mistaken. We see New Testament writers handling Old Testament texts in creative ways that would horrify modern rationalists (and many modern seminary professors), but which are consistent with 1st-Century Jewish use of Scripture.

¹ John 5:39-40 is relevant to the fundamentalist version of foundationalism: *You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf; yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

In other words, the Bible the Enlightenment demands does not exist. Much of the Evangelical church is chasing the mirage of the Bible that it thinks God should have written,² rather than the Bible we actually have. With a little theological reflection, it should not be surprising that the Bible refuses to behave according to our modern human expectations.

If we accept that the Bible is not meant to be a modern instruction manual or storehouse of objective facts, how then should we read it? Many “third way” Christian writers³ make the case that we should primarily read Scripture as story.⁴ But not just any story – the story of God’s ongoing mission to the world. That overarching story (metanarrative if you will) is not told from a single viewpoint, but instead dozens of writers bear witness to the grand narrative by telling part of the story, each from his or her unique perspective. Not only does approaching the Bible with a “story” paradigm better suit the Bible we actually have, but it is also more in tune with the way postmodern people think about things.

The Good News is that we are a part of this story. Each Christian, and the church as a whole, has a role to play in God’s continuing mission. The Bible points us to God revealed in Jesus as the central character of the story, and serves as a resource to help us better play our own roles. In the words of Lesslie Newbigen, *The true understanding of the Bible is that it tells a story of which my life is a part, the story of God's tireless, loving, wrathful, inexhaustible patience with the human family, and of our unbelief, blindness, disobedience. To accept this story as the truth of the human story (and so of my story) commits me personally to a life of discernment and obedience in the new circumstances of each day.*

The Bible and postmodernism also intersect around interpretation. Many who are influenced by fundamentalism say things like “I don’t follow man’s interpretations; I just believe what the Bible says.” It would be hard to find a better example of naïve realism. One need not be a radical postmodernist to recognize that every determination of “what the Bible says” involves interpretation and is affected by the perspective of the reader. As a fish may take for granted the water it swims in, many Christians who boast of being “Bible believing” don’t even realize that this is often just a synonym for “the way my tradition interprets the Bible.” At a minimum, postmodern insights should help the church and individual Christians recognize that they have no choice but to interpret Scripture as they read it, and that others with different perspectives might reasonably interpret some things differently. This recognition should lead to humility.

This does not, however, consign readers of the Bible to a morass of subjectivity, where each person gets to interpret as they please. The critical realism we discussed in Chapter 4 is appropriate here. There is truth in Scripture, even as our knowledge and interpretation of that truth is necessarily imperfect. Some interpretations are better than others, and it is our task to prayerfully do the best we can to discern what is right. We do not do that in isolation, but as part of a Christian community that (ideally) seeks the truth together and acts to guard against unhealthy interpretation.

² Even the common phrasing of God “writing” the Bible betrays modernist expectations that the best way for God to communicate is by directly writing us an instruction manual. Some modern doctrines of Scripture are effectively no different from a “dictation” approach, which more resembles Islam than historic Christianity.

³ See books in the Bibliography by Scot McKnight, Brian McLaren, and N.T. Wright.

⁴ Since for some “story” might have a negative connotation of falsehood, the term “narrative” is also used.

The demise of foundationalism also provides us with a gift for our interpretative task. If we see the Bible itself as our foundation, the variety and imperfection of our interpretations leaves us with something unable to support the weight placed upon it. Once we see Jesus as the foundation of faith, we can also recognize that Jesus is the center of God's story of redemption and reconciliation, and therefore the focal point of Scripture. This provides a lens to use in our interpretation.

Finally, we should think about the purpose of Scripture. If it is not a modern source of data from which to build a theological system, what is it? As has been said, *The Bible is not given for our information, but for our transformation.*⁵ The Bible is not an end in itself, but rather a means to help us better follow Jesus. Rather than static words, it is a vehicle for the speaking of the Spirit as the community gathers together and listens to the text. Much like a musician who immerses herself in a particular musical style is better prepared to improvise in that style, familiarity with God's story as witnessed to in Scripture prepares us to faithfully play our part in the ongoing story. As we find ourselves in this story, we can invite others to find their places as well.

Systems and Confessions

As we have already discussed, the modern church too often treats the Bible as a collection of propositions to be arranged into a neat system. Sometimes it seems as though the system is elevated above the Bible, so that we can almost dispense with that messy book once we have the right system figured out. In response to this, we must remember the Incarnation, in which God brings the story to fulfillment not by giving us a system, but by giving us Himself. Systematic theology is not necessarily a bad thing, but if we are focused on God's story that centers around Jesus, we will keep our systems in their proper role, which is to help us better understand, tell, and live the story. We must resist the modern temptation to put our faith in our systems of doctrine; instead our systems should be tools to help us put our faith in Jesus.

Christian communities throughout history have codified all or part of their belief systems in the form of confessions (or similar formulations that are called "creeds" or "essential tenets"). There can be great value in writing down what you believe and what you discern God is calling you to stand for (and perhaps against). Among other things, confessions, along with tradition and community more generally, can be a check on the sort of private interpretations that individuals might construct to support their own biases. But it must be recognized that all confessions are products of particular communities and circumstances; none of them is made from a God's-eye view. No confession should define an orthodoxy that is frozen for all time; to do so would imply that some particular confessing community achieved objective perfection. While pointing out the fallibility of confessions might seem like a postmodern move, it was actually a principle of the same Protestant Reformation that gave us many of these confessions. A slogan of the Reformation was "Reformed and always reforming," making the point that all of our efforts to delineate Christian doctrine are subject to bias and imperfection, so that we must always be open to the possibility that, as we study Scripture and reflect on God's story together, God may further reform our doctrines.

⁵ Upon looking up this quote, I was surprised to find that it originated with 19th-Century evangelist D.L. Moody, whom I think of as a fundamentalist. There is probably a lesson here about how epistemological humility means we should not assume that those we disagree with have nothing worthwhile to teach us.

Room for Questions and Doubts

The modern project is all about answers and certainty, and to a large extent so is the modern Evangelical church. The church often does not feel like a safe place for people to express their questions and doubts; questioning a doctrine about God is often equated with doubting (or even rejecting) God himself. Leaders are expected to have it all together with certainty, and if questions are welcomed from the congregation it is often only so that authority figures can respond with pat answers that end the conversation. There is a tendency to frame everything in simple black and white, us versus them, and those who see shades of gray are out of place.

This culture of pat answers and forced certainty does not appeal to postmodern people. For those who are aware of the limitations of human knowledge and the fallibility of human authority structures, the black and white certainty of the modern Evangelical church is alienating. Postmoderns are suspicious of claims to know what's best for them by people in power, so if the church pretends to have all the answers with 100% certainty (or worse, if it gives the impression that such certainty is required to follow Jesus), they will be turned off. They want a church where they can authentically wrestle with the big questions of life, where doubts and honest conversations are not threats to be stifled but instead are part of the process of stumbling forward together toward the truth. Humility and authenticity have always been qualities that Christians and the church should aim for, but they are especially important if we want to minister to people in a postmodern culture.

It is not just postmodern people that the church pushes away when doubts and honest questions are unwelcome. Independent of whether they have a postmodern outlook, many people have minds that are reflective and inquisitive, that appreciate nuance and shades of gray. In many churches, to be such a person feels like being a square peg with only round holes in sight. Having questions and expressing uncertainty is identified with weakness in faith, and it can seem that the only way for the reflective Christian to fit into the community is to stifle his or her God-given mind. Others may grow so frustrated with the (anti-)intellectual climate that they leave completely. Thoughtful, reflective Christians can be an asset for the Body of Christ, but that asset is often squandered.

Churches need to be safe places to express questions and doubts. There should be room for ambiguity and mystery, for humbly recognizing that we don't have all the answers. We need an environment where there is permission to ask questions like "what happened to fish during the Flood?" or "is my Buddhist friend really going to be eternally tortured in Hell?" or to wonder if the people who wrote down your church's doctrine in 1646 (or 2012) really got everything perfect. If such questions are unwelcome, the consequence for the church is that many people will be unwelcome.

Knowledge and Faith without Certainty

If the modern conservative church is too unwelcoming of questions, one might say that the modern liberal church is too unwelcoming of answers. I am reminded of the old joke about how a certain denomination (one that has left behind Christian orthodoxy) formed a branch of the Ku Klux Klan – they go around burning question marks on people's lawns. Questions and doubts are fine, but they are not ends in themselves. Ultimately our aim should be for them to lead us to answers that we can live by.

But answers are elusive in the postmodern world – at least the sort of certain answers that the Enlightenment demands. This is where concepts from Chapter 4 are helpful, in particular the idea that we must stop equating knowledge with certainty. Instead, even while recognizing that our knowledge is by necessity uncertain and imperfect, we commit ourselves to the truth as best we can make it out through the fog of this world.

Giving up the need for certainty runs counter to much Evangelical culture. Indeed, the case can be made⁶ that certainty operates as an idol in much of the church, in that being certain about our faith becomes the main goal rather than faithfulness in following Jesus who is the center of our faith. Even our language betrays the problem – when we talk about someone’s faith being “strong” or “weak” we usually mean the degree to which that person is certain in their beliefs. But Biblically, faith is not a matter of certainty of belief, it is a matter of trust in spite of uncertainty. The strength of your faith is not measured by your degree of certainty, but rather by the strength of your commitment to trust Jesus and live accordingly even when you are uncertain. The call of Jesus to his disciples was “Follow me,” not “be certain of this system of doctrine.”

Instead of idolizing certainty (an unattainable goal for postmoderns and reflective people), the church should be lifting up faithfully following Jesus, whether or not you feel certain. Letting go of the need for certainty (closely related to the desire for control) may be a necessary step for some people to move toward an authentic, trust-based relationship with God, rather than a pseudo-relationship based on our mental ideas about God. To put it another way, in the Incarnation God responded to our plight not by sending us propositions for our intellectual assent, but by sending us Himself to be in relationship with us. Similarly, our churches should see their role in spiritual formation and discipleship as relationally shaping people (individually and in community) into Christ-likeness, not just getting people to believe the correct ideas.

This relates to the previous section about doubts and questions. If certainty is our idol, doubts and questions are threats and it becomes natural to suppress them. But if the goal is Jesus, our questions can be vehicles for finding answers that help us be better followers, and for learning to trust God even when questions go unanswered. The process of authentically wrestling with God about our doubts and questions can itself be a tool for deepening our relationship with God. Any answers that arise from this wrestling will not be certain, but that should not stop us from making commitments and living faithfully.

The Importance of Community

As discussed in previous chapters, both the modern project and postmodernism are, each in its own way, individual-focused. While the modern church often claims to value “community,” too often it follows the culture. The result is an individualized faith, with little sense of community or of any mission beyond getting myself into Heaven after I die. This is reflected in individual-centered worship and programs that are marketed to churchgoers as consumers.

The church must embody a third way. God does not call us in isolation, but into the community formed around Jesus. This community should be a place where we reject the self-centeredness of modern and postmodern culture, and where we repent of what a recent

⁶ See the books by Gregory Boyd and Peter Enns in the Bibliography.

ecumenical statement⁷ called “the toxic idolatry of consumerism.” It should be a place where we live with the sort of self-sacrificing love and interdependence that Paul describes in I Corinthians as the Body of Christ.⁸ As an interdependent body, the church should not be a place where the professionals do the real ministry and the rest of us consume what they dispense (the division between professionals and consumers is very “modern”). In the classic Reformation phrase, the church is a “priesthood of all believers,” where all of us do important ministry and allow others to minister to us.

One thing postmodernism correctly recognizes about communities is that we are formed by the culture around us more than we realize. This highlights the important the role of the Christian community in forming disciples. Here too, we must reject the modern temptation to see discipleship as an individual pursuit. The postmodern self is defined more relationally, which is consistent with bearing the image of God whose being is fundamentally relational in the Trinity. Postmodern thought also tends to find truth more relationally, which is consistent with Christian faith where ultimate truth resides in the person of Jesus, whom we meet in relationship. Because of the importance of relationship for postmodern people, it will become even more important that people find a sense of belonging in the Christian community.

Power and the Powerless

Postmodernism is suspicious of the powerful who tend to decide what stories get told, and it tries to hear the voices of the marginalized. The Bible shares that view. There are many passages about how the rich and powerful will be brought low, and about God valuing the poor and lowly. Postmodern people should be able to appreciate that the Christian story (if we tell it correctly) isn’t about grasping worldly power, but rather is about a God who identifies with the powerless, to the point of letting the powers crucify him. Unlike the metanarratives that postmodernism critiques (often rightly), the Christian metanarrative should be about serving others, not about wielding worldly power over others.

Unfortunately, from medieval Europe to 21st-Century America, too often Christians have yielded to the temptation to seek worldly power. We need to recognize that when the church tries to be the center of power, it makes itself less appealing to postmodern people who are suspicious of power. Historically, the church has been at its best when it has been a prophetic voice speaking from the margins, and the church is corrupted when it grabs worldly power and influence.

We can also do better at listening to those on the margins. We should follow the example of Jesus in feeling a special burden for our neighbors who are marginalized by society, whether that status is due to economic factors, race, gender and sexuality, disability, age, or any of the myriad factors by which we divide people into “in” and “out” groups. The marginalized person may not only be the stranger we encounter on the street; it may be the person next to us in the pew. Many people feel marginalized within their own churches – this might include the elderly, the poor, single people, childless people, introverts, and people whose politics differ from the

⁷ The Cape Town Commitment – see <https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>.

⁸ Parts of the church are recovering a healthier focus on community through the so-called “New Perspective” on Paul, in which scholars like N. T. Wright make the point that the gospel is not merely about individual justification, but is about participation in Christ and in the new family constituted around Jesus.

prevailing view. The postmodernists are right when they tell us that such people are no less important than the “in” crowd, and a healthy Christian community will include them and celebrate their contributions.

Apologetics after Modernity

When I was in graduate school, a campus ministry brought in an evangelist who had all the answers, or at least acted like he did. His approach was to stand in a prominent place on campus and invite people to ask him anything about the Christian faith. Upon receiving a question, he would turn it over in his mind for a moment, and then respond with canned answer number 17(a). His answers were delivered with confidence, but I saw little listening or humility on his part, and no genuine dialog. Perhaps God used his prepackaged spiels to reach some people, or at least to start meaningful conversations among the crowd, but I was not impressed and I think most listeners were not either.

Modern apologetics features answers and arguments and evidence. In true Enlightenment fashion, advocating for the Christian faith has become all about science and philosophy and reason. If you go to a Christian bookstore and pick up a book on “apologetics,” it will make most of the same arguments that would have been made in 1950, or 1850. As we noted in Chapter 2, modernism drove the church to frame everything in philosophical and scientific terms, such as the famous *Four Spiritual Laws* gospel tract. Another well-known example is Josh McDowell’s book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (a very modern title – if we exhibited Third Way humility a better title might be *Evidence that Suggests a Verdict*).

There are at least two problems with the dominant evidentialist style in modern apologetics. The first (independent of any consideration of postmodernism) is that it tends to leave out Jesus. It typically focuses on philosophical and scientific arguments for the existence of God – and this could be any god, perhaps the god of Islam or some anonymous “Designer.” Blaise Pascal (a Christian philosopher and scientist about a generation after Descartes) had a term for that kind of god; he rejected “the God of the philosophers” and he wanted the attention to be on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the specific God revealed in Jesus. This is not to say there is never any value in these Enlightenment-style arguments, but if your argument never moves on to Jesus, you haven’t really gotten anywhere at all. Since Jesus is the center of the Christian faith, we should be wary of Jesus-free apologetic arguments.

Second, in an increasingly postmodern culture, the modern argument-based approach is becoming irrelevant and ineffective. It was probably never as effective as the proponents of evidentialist apologetics believed – few people come to Jesus through being argued into the faith. But postmodern people especially do not find truth and commitment through propositions and arguments; instead they find these things more relationally. While that should be conducive to Christianity, since our truth is ultimately found in relationship with the person of Jesus, modern apologetics has directed the conversation into things that are not valued by postmodern people.

So what should apologetics for our postmodern age look like? It should be more relational and participatory. It should focus less on producing intellectual assent to certain propositions and more on inviting people into relationship with Jesus. Rather than try to demonstrate the gospel by modern external criteria (science, philosophy, etc.), it might proceed from the inside

out, showing how the gospel illuminates everything else. We should interact with humility and the recognition that both we and those we dialog with come from particular perspectives and don't have a God's-eye view of all truth. Our conversations about the gospel should have room for doubt and honest questions. It should look less like an argument and more like friends working together to seek truth and meaning.

Above all, our words and our reasons will not be as important as our lives. That has probably always been the case, but it is even more so today. A term for this is "incarnational" apologetics, where the Body of Christ shows in the flesh what following Jesus is all about. Along the same lines, the church is sometimes described as an "embodied witness," where we witness not just with our words but with our whole lives, individually and in the life of our community. Two pastors who have thought deeply about being witnesses for Jesus in a postmodern world express the idea well. Bob Robinson⁹ said, *Postmoderns will want to see your truth before they will want to hear your truth. They will watch the way Christian communities live out their faith. They will be skeptical that a Christian belief in God really manifests itself in a changed life that they might want to embrace.* Brian McLaren¹⁰ put it this way: *The greatest apologetic for the Gospel is and always has been a community that actually lives by the Gospel.*

The Missional Church in the Postmodern World

In recent years, people have proposed many ways of thinking about how the church should function in an increasingly postmodern environment. Most of them incorporate some of the ideas advanced in this chapter. For example, churches that call themselves "emergent" are often good at avoiding fundamentalist approaches to Scripture, welcoming people with questions and doubts, and building community and relationship. As we close this chapter, I want to focus on a promising concept known as the missional church.

Much like "postmodern," it is difficult to define the term "missional."¹¹ We might start by contrasting it with what it is not. In modernity, the church is typically seen as an *institution* and/or as a *building*. It is a place where consumers go to receive something they hope will benefit them. "Mission" is often viewed as a *program* of the church, bringing the institution to the rest of the world, sometimes in a colonizing manner.

The missional church sees mission not primarily as an institutional program, but as something that God does. God is on a mission to bless and reconcile the world through Jesus, so the church as the Body of Christ is viewed not as an institution or building but as the embodiment of God's mission.

Another reason for thinking of the church itself as mission is that, at least in North America and Europe, we live in a post-Christian culture. The church is no longer a central institution that people automatically want to be a part of. The church is more like a mission outpost, where we are resident aliens or ambassadors in the land. For this reason, missional is often

⁹ On his *Vanguard Church* blog.

¹⁰ In his book *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*.

¹¹ For an overview and links to other resources, see the website www.friendofmissional.org. The books in the Bibliography by Newbigen (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*) and Roxburgh (*Introducing the Missional Church*) are also helpful for introducing the concepts.

contrasted with the “attractional” model of church that has become common in modern consumer culture. Attractional is “if you build it they will come.” It assumes that if we have good programs, nice facilities, and entertaining music and preaching, people will come and they can meet Jesus on our turf. The missional model recognizes that many today would never think of setting foot in a church, so if we want our neighbors to meet Jesus we have to bring Jesus to them, in word and deed.

We can also describe the missional church in terms of its *posture* toward its neighbors. Often modern Evangelical churches see people on the outside in only two ways: either as “targets” for conversion, or as enemies in some sort of “us vs. them” culture war. The missional church first and foremost lifts up the principle that we should love our neighbors (as somebody famously said 2000 years ago) and be God’s agents of blessing and reconciliation in every possible way. That means that blessing our neighbors is a good thing in and of itself; we don’t have to have an agenda of conversion in everything we do.

Because Jesus is at the center of God’s mission, the missional church will make Jesus its foundation, avoiding the failed foundationalisms of modern fundamentalism and modern theological liberalism. Many modern churches are preoccupied with defining boundaries that separate “us” from “them.” Some boundaries are probably necessary, but the missional church will spend less effort being the “boundary police” and devote more attention to the center, encouraging itself and others to move toward Jesus.

Similarly, apologetics for the missional church will not primarily be about arguments and systems of doctrine, but rather about showing people Jesus as the church embodies the mission of God. One way that has been expressed is to say we are a “witness and foretaste.” A witness meaning that our community should testify to Jesus in word and deed, a foretaste meaning that we are an outpost of the Kingdom of God, which is already breaking into this world, so when people see us they should get a taste of what God’s kingdom is like.

What might this embodied witness of a missional Christian community look like?

Our neighbors should wonder why we are so unusual in sacrificially loving one another (and them), why we are not caught up in the consumerism and materialism of modern society, why we are humble and put others ahead of ourselves when our society values assertive selfishness. They may be surprised that we don't fit the stereotypes of Christians as ignorant judgmental culture warriors. They will see that we shape our lives by a different Story than most. They should see a healthy community, or (probably more realistic) an authentic community that is honest about its un-health and committed to healing and reconciliation, a community of real humans stumbling together down the path of following Jesus and leaning on each other along the way. If the church is just another consumer option, Sunday-morning entertainment or a social club or a political constituency, we won't impact our neighbors in any positive way. But if we function as the Body of Christ, if we manage to be a distinctive interdependent Christ-centered community participating in God's mission of reconciliation, ambassadors of the Kingdom in God's grand Story, our neighbors will be blessed and, having been given a glimpse of the Kingdom, they may even want to be a part of it.