

The splintered cross

Changes and chances for the church in postmodern times

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Although many may find it an example of naive and magical belief, the veneration of ancient relics has not perished in our days. The reliquary may contain fragments of St. Peter's bones, remainders of St. John's hair, or slivers of the cross Jesus died on. It has been said, that when all the splinters of the cross were to be collected, at least three crosses could be constructed out of them. In my contribution for this book, dedicated to my teacher and friend Jan Visser, I want to express my gratitude for the time and interest he showed for the projects I am working on, and value his enthusiastic involvement in such diverse fields as church, science and society. As were our communications in the past years, these pages will be a mixture of personal commitment and scientific distance, and bear the marks of my own reformed background in an ecumenical discussion.

The splintered cross will be a metaphor to deal with the question whether the church can survive in postmodern times. In order to do so, I will first sketch some basic features of the postmodern human life, and outline the critical situation it presents for the church. Here the metaphor of the splintered cross points to the fragmentation of society, individuals and religion, and the impossibility to find a reintegration. After that I will try to show a direction for survival and renewal. Here the metaphor is given a positive reinterpretation.

POSTMODERNISM

I am fully aware of the many connotations the word 'postmodernism' has, and it is neither my intention to use it in a definitory way, nor to deal with a certain philosophical perspective. Instead, I use the word postmodernism as a term denoting the attitude of individuals and groups that is becoming wide-spread in our times. Central to this attitude is the radical denial of the possibility to maintain an integrating story (Van Peursen 1992). The encompassing (religious and non-religious) ideologies have been abandoned, and all that remains is fragmentation. Each individual has to collect his or her own stories to live by. This new attitude has a tremendous impact on the institutionalized Christian tradition.

It is not the first cultural landslide that threatens the church. The past five centuries have shown a sequence of cultural developments that have endangered the church in the shape it had until that moment. Each time it was feared that the changes would destroy the church, but after a while a new shape emerged, in which it proved to be possible to cope with a new situation. We have seen the emerging science of astronomy, bringing a whole new model of the world, which previously seemed to be incompatible to biblical revelation. We have seen the cultural consequences of the enlightenment, leading to the present rationalistic perspective. We have seen the influence of evolutionism, industrialization, the threat of secularization and individualization and their effects on the social structures of the church, resulting in a situation where the personal autonomy and individual needs are stressed at the expense of a decrease in group-loyalty.

This all too short and fragmentary depiction indicates that there is no reason to believe that the postmodern attitude in and by itself will provide the final collapse of the church. It is more likely that, as in the earlier confrontations, we may come to recognize a whole new situation, and formulate an adequate Christian response. This does not imply a disregard of the far-reaching consequences. In some respects, postmodernism is a more fundamental attack on Christian values than before and involves the heart of Christian faith. For that reason it deserves all our attention.

As has been the case in previous confrontations, the church at present has a problem in keeping up with the times. In our days we have finally found some ways of dealing with modernism. As Van der Loo and Van Reijen (1993) have pointed out, the modernization of our society is of a paradoxical nature, which can be described in four dimensions: differentiation, rationalization, individualization and domestication. In the first place, the principle of differentiation leads to a scaling down of social structures on the one hand, but to a scaling up of the functional networks on the other. While relations between people are more and more specialized and differentiated into specific functions, we need to have more (different) relations to fulfill our needs. In the second place, the principle of rationalization¹ results in plural perspectives and fragmentation of knowledge on the one hand, and general (though vague) global cultural systems. In the third place, the principle of individualization fosters personal autonomy on the one hand, while making people more dependent of impersonal structures on the other. In the fourth place, the principle of domestication means that humans have the capacity of controlling physical conditions, while at the same time making them more dependent upon technical and social limits and resources.

In dealing with modernism, much attention has been given to a more individualized, rationalized, differentiated and domesticated religious market. In ethics, dogmatics, pastoral care, and several other dimensions of the church, the challenge of modernism has been met. In my view, the evangelical movement has proven to be the most powerful in this respect. The evangelicals have provided a contextualized translation (in form and content) of the sixteenth century's reformed theology. We can see this in the attention given to personal choice, conversion and commitment (individualization), the

¹ Personally I would prefer to use the word 'rationalization' to describe the tendency to take a rational and logical argument as the only legitimate line of reasoning. This means that the only valid assumption is the one that is conceivable by the human intellect, thus disregarding important dimensions of mystery, emotion and story. In this paper however, I use the term in the way described by Van der Loo & Van Reyden.

stress on faith healing (domestication), the frequent schisms and seemingly rational theological systems (rationalization), and the institution of groups and congregations designed for specific 'market areas' (differentiation). At the same time, as might be expected given the paradoxical nature of modernization, the evangelical movement has firm strategies of heteronomy, dependency structures, social support, hierarchy, and adherence to a sometimes fundamentalist attitude towards the bible. Of course the evangelicals are not the only ones designing modernist religion, but they are the most successful in reaching modern people, including youth and minority groups.

When we consider the attempts of theologians like Kuitert to rethink the Christian tradition in a way modern humans can understand and accept, our attention is drawn to the impact of rationalistic reasoning. In many ways Kuitert is seen as a threat by orthodox reformed Christians, because his perspective is that all religion is a human construction. Kuitert does not deny the principle of revelation, but it functions not as a word from the transcendent God, but as a message from the tradition of religious people. Irrational assumptions (of which there are quite a few in orthodox reformed theology) are replaced by more rational explanations. Still, the fundamental starting point is that the notion of an encompassing story remains intact. Kuitert's approach is modern in individualistic, rationalistic, domesticated and differentiated ways. It seems, however, that this theological exercise does only attract modern man with a traditional background within the churches, and not the secular society or youngsters searching for truth, meaning, religion and God.

At present, many churches seem to learn the lessons the evangelicals teach. There is growing interest in the principles of church-vitalization, small groups within the church, and charismatic dimensions of the Christian life and of the church. No matter how important this may be, I fear that we may be outdistanced by the rapid changes in western society and in the people living in it. Where the church is only just catching up with modern man, humankind is already beyond modernism and plunging into a postmodern era.

A CRITICAL CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH

The postmodern attitude is a critical challenge. Not the first, and probably not the last. Perhaps it will even prove to be no more than a symptom of the 'fin de siècle' we live in. Future will tell. Still we have to deal with the present, and the present shows a radical threat. Postmodernism is not just a step further than modernism. It is a radical transformation. Modernism can be described in the terms used above, and a rational, logical and individualistic recontextualization is possible within the framework of the Christian tradition. Modernism could be coped with by means of 'first order' changes, changes that do not imply a change of the framework itself. Postmodernism calls for 'second order' change, an alteration of the entire system.

What is it that makes postmodernism so radical and critical? In my view the core threat and challenge lies in the fact that postmodern thinking is going beyond rationalism, because it takes its starting point in the fragmentation of life. Whereas for modern man fragmentation is a consequence (and often regarded as a negative one) of modernism, for postmodern man there is nothing but fragmentation.

Radical fragmentation means that not only the individual life is shattered into pieces and splinters, it means that the idea of an overarching story or meaning is abandoned. All

that remains is bits and pieces of meaning, fragments that are perceived as meaningful to the individual. The claim of universal truth and the desire for a community of shared meaningful religious stories are left behind. The criteria to decide whether certain points of view are true, certain actions are just, and certain interpretations are right, can no longer be found outside of the individual who is to make that decision. Claims of the tradition, the community or of any text said to be revelatory are rejected. Up to the present, the church has not been able or willing to leave the corpus christianum behind. Although we know - at least in western societies - that our culture is not dominated by the sacred canopy of a shared religion any more, there seems to be no real alternative way of ecclesiastical presence.

The origins of this postmodern style of living can be traced back to sociological and psychological developments of our centuries. Due to trends like industrialization, specialization, urbanization, mobility, the social network people live in is in our days fragmented. As I have shown in my study of faith-crisis relationships, the structure of the social network is copied in the structure of the person's life and world view (Ganzevoort 1994). Baumgartner (1995) points to the fact that the human being has lost his central place in the cosmos (Copernicus), his excellence over the other creatures (Darwin), and his self-control (Freud), and therefore is lost in the finitude and uncertainty of life, in which the collective narratives and systems of meaning are no longer convincingly available. For young people today, the world they come to know is extremely large and diverse, particularly because of the influence of information technology and mass media. At the same time it is radically fragmented, as can be seen in modern music and television. There is no longer one predominant system of meaning. They have access to a wide range of systems and experiences and therefore eclectically fabricate their own views.

POSTMODERN AND CHRISTIAN?

Is it recommendable to reframe Christian faith in a postmodern way and is it possible? These are the questions I want to address. In my view, the first one should be answered by a prompt and unambiguous 'yes'. No matter how radical and perhaps negative the consequences of a postmodern perspective may be, if we do not at least try to update the Christian life, we will soon be a church without believers. At several instances, history has shown that mere rejection of cultural developments is unfruitful in the long run. It leads to isolation which proves the Christian faith to be irrelevant for non-believers. If we claim that faith in God and in Jesus Christ is relevant to humans of every period in history and future, we will now have to enter into a dialogue with postmodernism.

The second question concerns the possibility of a reformulation. The question I want to address now is how we can keep up with the times, and how the church can find a way to appeal to (post-)modern humankind. I have a strong feeling that young people in our days are most influenced by postmodern thinking, and therefore are the first focus of a rethinking of Christian faith and a test case for the church. Given the many investigations showing that young people tend to form their own religion in a bricolage-fashion, gathering bits and pieces from every system of meaning available to them, it seems correct to consider these youngsters as postmodern.

The question is frequently put in terms of evangelization. We then ask ourselves how we can reach (young) people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think we should go beyond

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that question. It is not just a matter of translation, of finding new words and ways. We have come to a dramatic turning point where the whole understanding of Christian faith needs to be renewed (Tieleman 1995). How can we keep up with the times? This question is far more fundamental than the technical difficulties of evangelization.

The church is faced with an impossible task. This is the case not only in our days, it is true for all times and all places. The task is impossible, because it is contradictory. On the one hand, the church is called to preserve the gospel in its pure content, on the other hand the gospel has to be given shape in the language and culture of the believers. This inculturation is necessary because without shape the content is lost, maybe even non-existent. Message without form is nothing but an abstract thought that has nothing to do with the gospel of Christ incarnate. Yet, giving shape in a specific time and culture always alters the message itself. Hannah Green's novel "Founders praise" (In Dutch translation: "De apostelen van broeder Bisset") paints a wonderful picture of the growing distance between the personal religious experience of one man, and the institutionalized community of his followers.

It is this dramatic process the French philosopher Jacques Ellul (1987) has described as the perversion of revelation and the subversion of Christianity. He states that Christianity has a history in which divine revelation has been violated in every aspect and in every time. It is not just that some people misunderstood the meaning of the gospel, or that some times and situations led to degeneration of the original message, Ellul accuses the entire church.

I use this charge of Ellul, because it may help us to uncover the central focus of Christian faith, and the nuclear message of the church. More than that, I believe that the challenge of postmodernism can help us to return to this central meaning. For that purpose, I will turn to three aspects of the church: doctrine, moral and community. Having discussed these three features (in short), we will ask whether a purified and renewed faith can be found, and return to the metaphor of the splintered cross. This approach takes seriously that the threat of postmodernism does not originate from the outside only. The developments of the culture we live in are only threatening for a certain shape and structure of the church as it has evolved over the years. It might be equally true to see the threat in these shapes and structures, as Ellul's analysis tries to show.

DOCTRINE

God's revelation is a mystery. Anyone who reads the bible can be impressed by it. At the same time God reveals Himself, and He hides Himself. The disclosure of the transcendence takes place in a concealed manner. His voice can be heard, nobody has ever seen God but the Son of man. This is precisely the reason why it is forbidden to create an image of God. When He reveals Himself, He hides from the human eye. He is present among us, and still we can never get hold of Him.

No matter how fundamental this mysterious nature of revelation, we are forced to go further than that. Our own needs, and the questions posed by people around us, bring us to the point where we formulate creeds and doctrines to answer and describe what cannot be known. When we consider the history of Christian theology and dogmatic issues like trinity, election, covenant, providence and suffering, we see a continuous move from the revealed (and concealed) mystery to concrete unambiguous answers to

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fundamental human questions. This does not mean that anyone knows the complete and final answers, but we continue to look for a reasonable (adequate and intellectually satisfying) solution.

The move from revelation to doctrine is necessary, because living with only a mystery keeps us in the blind, yet impossible, because Gods revelation in the bible is not fully rational, not systematically structured, and not free from contradictions. It is a series of stories, each highlighting one aspect, and disregarding other parts of 'the truth'; a sequence of narratives making us participant in a world-changing history. The doctrines mentioned above (and in fact, each doctrine) do not only lead to more questions than they answer, they are in and by themselves of a different nature than the narratives of Gods revelation.

It will be unavoidable to systematize the messages found in the bible, but at the same time we have to acknowledge that every system is in tension with the nature of revelation. Because of this, we find in the bible itself a strong tendency to criticize the religious systems of both Jews and pagans. In our confrontation with the postmodern challenge, the first thing we have to do is cooperate in the destruction of the religious and dogmatic systems. This does not mean that every systematization will be refused, but the rejection of the systems can help us in uncovering the 'narratives of God and man' as they are given to us in the bible. Thus we can alter the threat into a challenge, and not only bring postmodern humans closer to the church, but also bring the church closer to Christ.

MORAL

The revelation of God is not only the mystery (in tension with our dogmatic systems), it is also the message of liberation, which is in tension with our moral guidelines and rules. We see here the same paradox we encountered in the dimension of doctrines. Reading the bible it is quite obvious that God is continuously tearing down the walls of human morality, and bringing humankind back into a direct relation with Him. The Sermon on the Mount and the letter of Paul to the Galatians are good examples, and the way Jesus dealt with prostitutes, tax collectors, women and children shows His radical perspective of grace instead of law and order.

This approach is so fundamentally different from human life, that the church has never found a way of living up to it. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, has been put off as a pious but unpractical ideal, or has been used as a legitimation for the preaching of unattainable moral standards, turning people of good will into troubled sinners. The radical freedom and purity has often not been heard.

When people reject the moral claims they perceive to be preached in the church, it is tempting to consider them as rebels or unbelievers. Young people often feel rather free to go their own way and refuse to be forced into the ethical strait-jacket of the church. This does not mean, however, that they are unwilling to follow Jesus. It only shows that the moral framework of the church is perceived as inadequate. Although in some occasions their behavior may indeed be an indication that they reject the christian faith, far more often it has been the church that creates stumbling-blocks in the wrong places. Therefore our confrontation with young people (and in fact with every one who is influenced by this world in a postmodern way) can help us to get rid of all the humanly induced moral barriers, and to return to the nuclear message of grace, mercy and

freedom in the Spirit. The postmodern ideal of making one's own choices might be more compatible with this biblical message than is the heteronomy proclaimed in the church.

This does not mean that every moral claim should be rejected. As I have argued before, doctrinal systematization is necessary and unavoidable. In the same way we have to formulate moral guidelines, if only to follow the calling into obedience we hear in the Scriptures. What I want to stress here is that this obedience is not a goal in itself, but part of the life of a Christian as walking in the ways of God. Moral claims should contribute to a personal faith, not darken the mercy and grace God has revealed.

COMMUNITY

When I consider postmodern people to be candidate-partners in uncovering the central meaning of the bible, the question should be posed if I am not overlooking the fact that postmodern living implies a highly individualized religion that cannot be integrated into a real community of believers. I am aware of this danger. Still it seems to be true that the meaning of community is changed in postmodernism, but not absent. As De Lange (1993) points out, at least some postmodern thinkers do value the sense of community, but the argumentation for communal life has changed. Reasons for living within the structure of a community are now to be found in the personal experiences and convictions. This new interpretation of the importance of community can be recognized in the experiences and behavior of young people. The adherence to individually chosen, temporary groups for the fulfillment of their needs and expectancies, they show a postmodern attitude.

What has happened in the history of Christendom, is that each and every time the structures available in a certain period were used to build the church. The infrastructure of Roman roads created the opportunity for the missions of Paul, the needs of the Roman empire led to the privileged position of Christianity over other religions. The political structure of provinces was copied in an Episcopal church structure. The feudal structure can be recognized in parochial systems, etcetera. Thus it can be expected that the changes of our times (mobility, individuality, fragmentation) will lead to different religious communities in the near future. This might result in the destruction of the public church as we know it, and lead to new forms of Christian communities, based on personal choices and preferences. History had shown the creative potential of Christians in building such new communities.

In some ways this could be a tremendous opportunity for the church. As has been said in the discussion of doctrine and moral, the original meaning of community has been subverted into an institution that often does not foster the individual faith of the believers, but restricts it. As an example we can point to the sacralizing tendency in humankind. Time and again people have marked certain places, times, persons and ritual as holy, as manifestations of the transcendent world. The bible shows that God does not want to be limited to those sacralized institutions. The first chapter of Genesis desacralizes the sun and the moon, the priests of Baäl are unmasked at Mount Karmel, and the curtain in the Temple is torn from the top (heaven) down (earth).

New forms of community, inspired by the confrontation with postmodernism, might help us to leave the traditionalistic structures behind. This would be a progress as the present structures are often sacralized and therefore subverted into a barrier for personal

faith and for a true understanding of the original meaning of the gospel. In this way the threat of postmodern life could become a challenge for the church. It may be clear that my intention is not to proclaim an individualistic faith or a rejection of communities. Instead I want to be open to the new kind of community that may come into existence.

RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH?

Fundamental for each of the three dimensions is the observation that the message of the gospel is to be given shape in every specific situation, and that at the same time the generated structure and institution are in conflict with the central meaning of the gospel. This dilemma Ellul described so well cannot be solved by striving for a shapeless Christian faith, nor by sacralizing the structures. In every situation we are called to return to the central message, and to develop new shapes and structures adequate to the time we live in.

The question we are facing is whether it will be possible to move away from the doctrines, moral rules and community-structures we have come to know, and return to the core narrative of God and man, as it is revealed at Mount Sinai and in Jesus Christ. Given the seriousness of the charges of subversion, and the radical turnaround of postmodern life, we should not be too confident that this renewal will be easily obtained.

We can find our inspiration in the stories of the people of Israel, brought to the desert after their years in Egypt. When they came to Egypt in the time of Joseph, Egypt was their rescue from hunger and starvation. The structures of food distribution in Egypt were Gods way of supporting His people. However, when the times changed, Egypt became their prison camp. Then God took the initiative of bringing them out of Egypt into the desert, and on their way to a promised land. They went reluctantly, afraid to leave their relatively safe situation. Israel had to learn to follow the voice, move forward into uncertainty, and live with thirst and fear with nothing but an occasional oasis. Likewise we might be called to leave behind the structures we trusted, and follow the dream of Gods future.

How do we make this move? As I have argued before, we should not take the defensive attitude of condemning the postmodern life and thinking. In our situation, we might come to the conclusion that young postmodern people offer the best alliance for the church in order to get ready for the future. I have tried to make clear that postmodernism as described above is basically in correspondence with the fundamental biblical critique of human religion.

This does not mean that the church should become an uncritical disciple of postmodernism. In the confrontation there will and should be a mutual understanding and a mutual questioning of the fundamental convictions. We should learn to criticize the doctrines we built around the narratives of Gods revelation, but we should criticize the postmodern 'doctrine' of rejection of all doctrines and ideologies as well. We learn to criticize the moral rules we constructed, but we also criticize the egocentric ethics of postmodernism. We learn to desacralize the shape of community we know, but we criticize the extremes of individualization at the same time. In short: if we are to be postmodern Christians, we can only do so by being Christian postmodernists.

THE SPLINTERED CROSS

We return to our metaphor of the splintered cross. I believe this metaphor can help us reframe the situation, and turn the threat into a challenge. The crisis of the Christian religion might prove to be an optical illusion (Tieleman 1995). The splintered cross, which at first sight points to the fragmentation of the most important Christian symbol, can be reinterpreted as pointing to the opportunity of renewing the church.

The central point of this metaphor is the insight that each splinter represents the entire cross. No matter how small the splinter may be, for the believer it is a reference to the whole cross and to everything symbolized in it. Each tiny fragment of wood carries the entire narrative of God's love for man, His intervention in human history, His triumph over dead and evil, and eternal life. It symbolizes the meaning of our lives.

In dealing with fragmentation, this might teach us to value the fragments of faith that can be found in the human reality rather than try to sell the belief in Jesus Christ in a package deal with the structures we know. We might begin to understand that even a splinter of faith in the narratives about Jesus is a reference (and an adequate one) to the whole of God's revelation. Jesus Himself valued the fragments of faith in the lives of people He met, and did not demand a fully elaborated and systematically correct faith from the outset. Many examples can be found in the bible that faith is more like a journey, wandering and uncertain, only following the voice of someone calling, than like the stability of living in the promised land.

Saying this, I do not argue for a vague understanding of Christian faith. What I would like to stress is that these fragments can be appreciated, and thus become an invitation to share more of the narratives of the gospel. Proclamation and witnessing can find their place in a postmodern encounter, if we are prepared to leave our ideology behind, and enter into a world of meaningful narratives together. In this way we try to notice the fragments and interpret them as references to God. Only if this interpretation is accepted, the splinters will be fragments of faith.

We should take the fragments of faith as serious as the fragments of life people live in. De Lange (1993) rightly points to the fact that for many people the fragments of life cannot be integrated into a coherent story. As he states: "Death makes life a fragment. God is the horizon against which the pain for the uncompleted and the desire for completion stand out." He sees faith as the possibility to live as a fragment. The crucifixion of Christ shows the final fragmentation, and His resurrection is not the abolition of fragmentation, but God's affirmation of it. This makes it possible for us to live with the fragments of our own life, because each fragment is a reference to the entire cross.

The effort to reframe Christian faith in a postmodern perspective might bring us to the point where we rediscover the relational dimension over the doctrinal approach. The new community of believers will not be ruled by tradition and heteronomy, but by the personal inspiration each and every one of us can find in the biblical narrative of God and humankind, by the personal and individual relation with Jesus, and by the recognition that the Spirit is present and active in each single follower. Thus we can and should reinterpret massive words like the authority of Scripture, like covenant and community, vocation and calling (Fowler 1987, Gerkin 1991).

CONCLUSION

The metaphor of the splintered cross can inspire us to search for new ways and new forms of Christian life in postmodern times. Even if the diversity and plenitude of splinters makes it impossible to reconstruct one single cross out of them, even if the many new shapes and meanings cannot be integrated into one single theological system, each splinter symbolizes the whole.

Theologians will face the task to hear the fragments of faith and connect them with the narratives of the bible. This does not only lead to new issues in theology, it might imply a whole new method of theological reasoning in which the church will have to communicate with its own tradition, with the revelation of God and with humans in a new era. This new theology will be fragmentary by nature. The encompassing dogmatic systems have served the Christian tradition well, but it seems that they will be less useful for postmodern Christian life. Instead of systematization, we should turn to the particularity of the subject (both in the classic texts and in the human realm, Tracy 1981). This implies a moderation of the validity and relevance of each insight.

I do not advocate a fully subjectivized perspective, because the personal relation with God, and the communication with fellow believers and with the bible create a horizon of understanding and of interpretation. The fragmentary approach might indeed bring us closer to understanding the bible. Dunn (1977) has shown how diverse and fragmentary the New Testament 'theology' is, and instead of trying to force this diversity into a one-sided systematization, we might learn to value the diversity. To do so however does require a criterion on which to assess what insights can be legitimated as Christian. Traditionally the criterion was sought in logical and historical truth. For the postmodern future we might prefer the criterion of reliability. Christian insights are characterized by the fact that they show that God is trustworthy, and that the bible is a reliable source for knowing Him.

The direction I have tried to point at in these pages (and I know it is far from a clear road-map) is a challenging, maybe even dangerous one. Still I see no other way of dealing with the situation we live in. To me it is not at all self-evident where we will arrive if we follow this route. It might mean a farewell to the confessional statements of our tradition. It might mean new inspiration by mystic life. It might find new ways in practical action. It might even mean something unheard of before. At this moment I simply don't know, and the search I am depicting here is a personal struggle as well as a pastoral and theological one. We may lose much that is sacred to us now, but I am confident that the Holy Spirit will lead us to new ways of wandering with God.

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