Preaching the Gospel to People Sick of Irony

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By Patrick Miller

This is the second part of a two-part essay exploring metamodernism. In part one, we suggest recent vibe shifts represent not only a rightward shift, but a post-postmodern shift. In the first essay, we defined the cultural shift that is now taking place. Now we will explain how Christians can contextualize the gospel in a metamodern world.

In *Center Church,* Tim Keller calls Christians to follow the pattern of Paul by contextualizing the gospel. To do this, we take a culture's objections seriously and seek to understand its hopes and aspirations. Paul, rather than dismissing his culture's aspirations, "both affirms and confronts [the culture] … and then urges [people] to find ultimate fulfillment of their cultural aspirations in Jesus Christ." Contextualization is an ongoing process, necessary in every generation if Christians wish to see a missionary encounter between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

Effective contextualization requires us not only to take stock of our culture (more on that below) but also the church's place in it. Keller suggests that the church goes through seasonal cycles:

- **Periods of winter**: when the church shows little spiritual vitality and there is strong cultural resistance
- **Periods of spring**: when some resistance remains but new spiritual growth is evident
- **Periods of summe**r: when Christians are feel at home in a culture, and find themselves nearer to the center or cultural power/production
- **Periods of autumn**: when Christians find themselves increasingly marginalized, and the church seeks ways to reach the culture winsomely

It seems to me that the bitter winter of the last decade is thawing. We now stand on the precipice of spring. But it's not just the church that has felt the chill of winter. Cultures *also* experience seasons. And our culture has been Saturnine for some time: Always winter, but never Christmas. Those contextualizing gospel ministry must take this into account.

A Culture in Winter

The last decade has been, in the telling of Byung-Chul Han, a breathless muddle from crisis to crisis, such that we now face a "pandemic of fear" and anxiety. While external threats generated some of the anxiety, the deeper cause is postmodernity's unbearable demand for individual humans (in the absence of grand narratives) to self-create and self-realize. The irony is that postmodernity is, itself, anti-creative. It militates against the very thing it demands. Han writes, "[Postmodernism] lacks the pathos of the new, the passion for the new. It produces only variations of the same." Put differently, the deconstructive milieu is a sledgehammer, not a paintbrush. It makes variations of rubble, not art.

Why? Because there is no "meaningful horizon" for postmodern people. There is no grand story capable of narrating life. Thus, there is no hope. No sense of the future. No creative vision. There is only anxiety and fear, which "is incapable of speech, incapable of narration." Indeed, "Without ideas, without a horizon of meaning, life withers and becomes survival, or – as we see today – the pure immanence of consumption."

5 Ways to Contextualize the Gospel in Metamodernity

The church and American culture have undergone a long winter. Likewise, both seem to be undergoing a great dethawing. I suspect this is an unusual conjunction, but I'm no historian. What I can say is that the church is experiencing the dethawing as spiritual renewal. The culture is experiencing it as metamodernism. This is not to suggest that metamodernism is Christian in any sense. It is not. There must be a missionary confrontation between the two. However, I would propose that the cultural *aspirations* of metamodern people find their fulfillment in Christ more naturally than those of postmoderns. In particular, metamodern longing for transcendence, meaning, sincerity, hope, and enthusiasm.

According to professors Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, Metamoderns are open to *informed naivety, ironic sincerity* and *pragmatic idealism*. Put differently: they're hungry for more than what modernity *or* postmodernity offered. T.S. Eliot, writing on culture and beauty, observed that people do "not need merely enough to eat . . . but a proper and particular cuisine." Metamoderns are not satisfied with the empty calories of modernity or postmodernity. They long for a "particular cuisine" that *isn't* naive and yet *is* somehow effulgent with purpose, power, beauty, exuberance, and meaning. And *this* is precisely what Christ offers (Col. 1:15-23).

To that end, I want to explore how we contextualize the gospel in five dimensions of the church's life: 1) Spiritual realism in evangelism; 2) Aspirational, ancient, direct discipleship; 3) Emotiveness and vulnerability in community and pastoral care; 4) Embarrassing Sincerity in Preaching; and 5) Embracing the cringe in worship. These are preliminary thoughts. I hope to begin a conversation, not foreclose debate or new ideas.

1) Spiritual Realism in Evangelism

After Joe Rogan's interview with Christian apologist Wesley Huff, Glen Scrivener analyzed the conversation, paying special attention to Rogan's interests and reactions. He suggested that three topics particularly engaged Rogan's imagination: Miracles, Humanity, and Morality. Rogan isn't alone. Metamodern openness to transcendence and enchantment alongside its drive for meaning-making make all three powerful evangelistic hooks.

Miracles

Metamoderns are open to alternate realities, spiritual realism, and the possibility of outside forces influencing life in the immanent frame. In the postmodern era, sharing miraculous stories seemed naive and childlike. But now there's an awareness that much of the world is beyond our comprehension. We know, because of our fragmented, saturated media environment, that its hard to know anything—so it's no surprise that people are open to otherworldly realities/experiences like UFOs, Ayahuasca, and Astrology. Thus, Wesley Huff's personal story of a miraculous healing isn't a laughing matter to Rogan. Indeed, stories of true miracles will connect with the metamodern longing for (and even belief in) enchantment.

Humanity

There is something exceptional about humanity in the cosmos. Our experiences of love, heartache, beauty, and purpose find no perfect analogue in the animal kingdom. Metamoderns value their own experience of each of these features of human life. They want to protect those internal experiences from external deconstruction. Presenting Christianity as the only narrative that makes sense of these realities—and indeed enshrines them as reality —will appeal to their aspirations.

Morality

We can build on the previous insight by pointing out that concepts like goodness and justice are chaff for the flame of deconstruction. To the postmodern mind both function as a mask for power plays. But metamoderns want to affirm the meaning of the goodness and justice they feel. Again, the Christian story grounds these values in the character of God, protecting what metamoderns intuit from deconstructive critique.

"Alternative Truths"

The challenge in evangelism comes from the metamodern hyper-awareness of alternative truths. In the Oscar-winning, metamodern film *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* a mother and daughter discover that their reality is but one of a million billion realities, in which they live different lives—as rocks, pinatas, kung fu superstars, and hot-dog-handed weirdos. This leads both into a form of postmodern nihilism. No reality has any meaning if so many realities exist. Thus, the daughter chooses to absorb herself into the "everything bagel of nothingness," accepting that once you see through everything there is nothing at all. But the mother, after a brief daliance with nihilism, chooses to embrace the absurdity. She chooses to make meaning of one reality, to make meaning out of her broken relationship with her daughter. This is a quintessential metamodern move, you might call it "chosen reality." But this is decidedly different from what Jesus offers, which is "real reality."

I suspect we'll see many people temporarily play Christian-dress-up as a "chosen reality," only to shirk at Christ's universalizing claims about "real reality." Thus, our apologetics must help people move from, "I wish it were true" to "I'm choosing to believe it's true" to "Yes, it really is true."

2) Aspirational, Ancient, Direct Discipleship

Over the last six years, John Mark Comer has risen from a somewhat-known pastor in Portland to an international sensation. He wrote several books before *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, but they were focused on Biblical theology, not spiritual disciplines. Why did the latter catch fire? In part, it's because Comer's writing matured, and his latest works are steeped in practical wisdom. But I also believe it's because they're aspirational, ancient, and direct—all of which appeal to metamodern people.

Aspirational Discipleship

Metamodern culture is far less skeptical about hope and vision than its postmodern forebears. It's aspirational. As John Mark Comer reminds his readers, there is a beautiful life to be lived and it's accessible to anyone who chooses to walk in the way of Jesus. Discipleship should not shirk from aspiration. Our deep longing for theosis, to become like Christ and enjoy union with him, speaks to the metamodern thirst for deep wells of purpose

and transcendence. This easily stretches beyond practice of the disciplines: we should orient our discipleship around a positive vision. Growing in virtue. Deepening friendships. Growing in discipline. Endeavoring to live with transparency before God and others.

Ancient Discipleship

Postmodernity is liquid and unrooted. It values style over substance. And looks askance at anything ancient as regressive, colonial and worthy of deconstruction. Metamodern people want to experience something real, and antiquity promises a rooted, thick, substantive foundation that stands in stark contrast to the surface-level, social mediafied world around them. Comer promises to train his readers to walk on an ancient path, and that's appealing. I also suspect that we'll see a resurgence in concepts like virtue and honor. Rather than eliciting a tired, sidelong glance, the challenge of growing in virtue is likely to inspire interest, intrigue, and even holy ambition.

Direct Discipleship

Let's return to *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*. The characters are incredibly conscious of the fact that there are an infinite number of possibilities for their individual life. They aren't naive to the lessons of postmodernity: that there's an endless number of perspectives and standpoints on any given issue. Nonetheless, they choose to embrace one. They integrate postmodern reality into a chosen reality. Similarly, Comer is aware that there are numerous perspectives on the topics he covers, but he doesn't fall into the trap of offering a "Four views on ____" prolegomena for every practice. He simply offers one, direct perspective.

Brad East has made similar observations as a college professor. When he's asked a question by a student he doesn't start by saying, "Well, there's three positions on ____." Instead he finds the thread that runs through church history (ancient discipleship) and says, "Well, the church has always believed ____ for ____ reasons." This isn't to say we shouldn't welcome probing questions on different perspectives, but it is to say that our metamodern culture is self-consciously biblically illiterate and interested in the simple "how to" and "what to believe" of orthodox Christianity. So rather than getting bogged down in the possibilities, directness is key.

Discipleship in the metamodern era will braid together pragmatism and idealism, directness and aspiration, antiquity and present practice.

3) Emotiveness and Vulnerability in Community and Pastoral Care

Cultural moods impact interpersonal relationships. While it would hardly be true to suggest that *everyone* in the deconstructive era avoided (certain kinds) of emotiveness, sincerity and vulnerability, I know from personal experience that a soft form of ironic banter and cynicism

can be found in many churches. In some settings, it was a way of setting apart "cool" Christians from church ladies; a way to prove that you're not simple-minded.

But there's a cost to sarcasm, irony, and cynicism in interpersonal settings: distance. Ironic modes of relating—everyone playacting Aaron Sorkin characters—are forms of self-protection. From the risk of appearing naive and overly sincere, *and* from the deeper risk of emotional vulnerability. In other words, we don't want to appear *too* emotional, *too* spiritual, or *too* enthusiastic. If one must be emotional, anger, irritation, and jaded disdain were the most culturally acceptable expressions. Such environments make deep friendships challenging. Sarcasm is a universal relational acid. That's bad news for people like me. Irony is my native tongue. I'm far more a child of postmodernity than I want to admit.

Yet, over the last few years we've seen a resurgence of sincere, emotional, spiritual expression—especially among men—in our pastoral care, small groups, and retreats. When one person takes the plunge and risks sincerity, others quickly follow. When one person embraces emotions like hope, sadness, joy, or grief, others want more. There's a hunger for transparency and emotional enthusiasm. Cynicism is tired. Irony is boring. People want an expressive, cringy, interpersonal emotional connection. I lead one men's group where (I kid you not) the guys all hug each other each time we get together. That would've been cringy, weird, and creepy a few years ago. But expressing that kind of relational exuberance in groups has been the key to forging deep relationships in the metamodern era. When we do so, we obey an ancient Biblical command to embrace bodily, emotive, expressions of greeting (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14).

The best way we've found to facilitate this kind of post-ironic community is to model it in retreat settings. We take men away for 2-3 days, invite leaders to share their stories with unabashed honesty and then ask group members to follow. The response is often the same "I was skeptical of this. I didn't want to come. I thought I would never participate. But then I couldn't help it. I did. And it changed my life." I might have called such retreats cheesy or over-emotional in the past, but I'm now seeing the truth: there isn't just a hunger for this kind of care/group/retreat, there's a *need* and it's changing lives. Jesus's church can fulfill the cultural aspiration for sincere relational connection in a way no other institution can.

4) Embarrassing Sincerity in Preaching

While not universal, much preaching throughout the postmodern era unconsciously adjusted itself to the objections of postmodernism and took on some of it's character. Whether it was Mark Driscoll in affliction t-shirts, moody church planting guides, or entire church bodies defined by what they're against in evangelicalism, there was a dower, ironic, cynical mood in the air.

Reflecting on my own teaching, I've identified at least seven ways I adjusted to the deconstructive mood:

1) *Writing for the cynic.* All pastors imagine people when they write sermons, because we want the gospel to land in real life. But sometimes it's like we're afraid everyone is Tyler Durden.

2) *Deflecting cynicism by expressing cynicism*. About what? Other Christians, of course, who are Christians doing it wrong.

3) *Showing hyper-sensitivity to deconstructive narratives in the church.* You see this when pastors act like church abuse is pervasive (appealing to the left) or acting like woke teaching is pervasive (appealing to the right).

4) *The heavy use of irony in humor.*

5) *Avoiding sincere bodily and verbal expression as "cheesy" or "over the top."* It's not cool to care. So *if* you care, take care to not look like a church lady.

6) *Fourth wall breaking.* By this I mean a hyper-awareness of how the medium itself (preaching) piques cynicism in others. I know that others are cynical about pastoral motives (greed, celebrity, etc). So I break the fourth wall. I name their cynicism, hoping that if they see that *I* can see the (potential) ruse, then they'll believe I'm above it. Deadpool preaching, if you will.

7) *Too little emphasis on the Holy Spirit.* Belief in miracles and gifts strikes postmodernism as naive. Thus, pastors avoided Holy Spirit talk lest they look credulous.

Now is the time to reverse course and move toward *sincerity*. In 1993, David Foster Wallace wrote an essay reflecting on postmodern media. His observations were nearly prophetic, as they describe our current metamodern moment. And while he's describing a *literary* style he would later take up, I think the "rebellious" approach he argues for applies to preaching in the metamodern era,

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. … The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness.

Pastors who feel like natives in postmodernity (Gen X, and aging Millennials in particular) must learn to rebel against their old impulses. I believe this means sincerity, enthusiasm, and an unembarrassed proclamation of the power of God. We must be less Driscoll, and more like John Piper. There is nothing impressive about his appearance. To the postmodern mind he is naive, and silly. But a metamodern context will be open to a form of informed naivety that is much more comfortable with Piper's style of raw, enthusiastic, single-entendre preaching style.

## 5) Embracing the Cringe in Worship

Take a break from this essay to watch two music videos side-by-side. Both are by contemporary Christian artists. Both were/are incredibly popular in their time. Both describe an experience of God lifting his followers out of mud and mire (Ps. 40:2).

Start with *Flood* by Jars of Clay.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/EfAhpX_wIBk

Then watch *Up!* by Forrest Frank.

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/wCw-W-2Rs0k
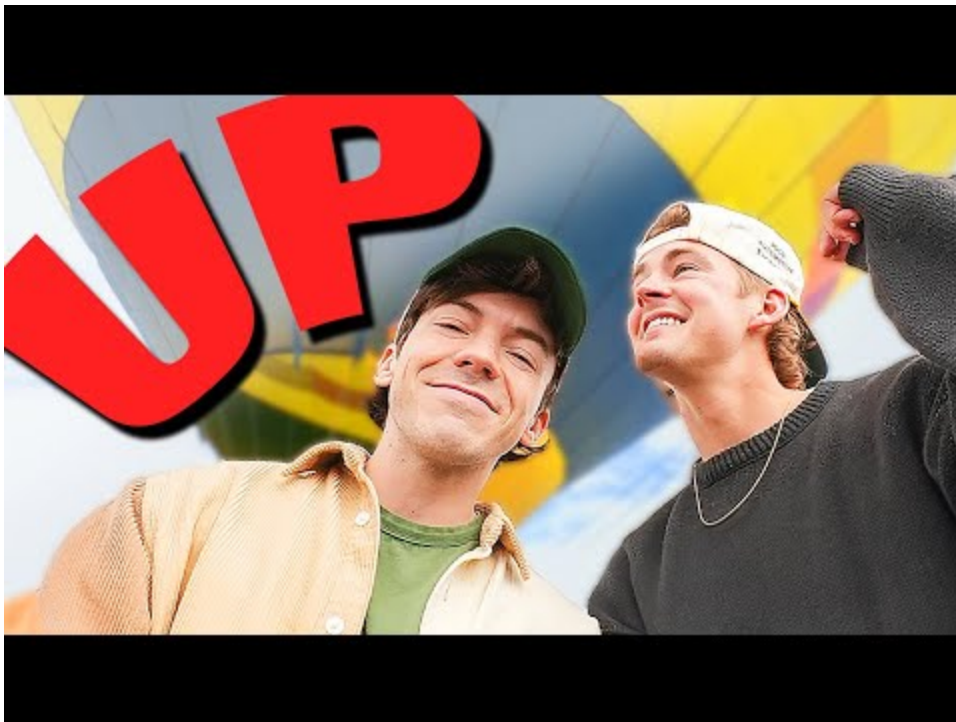
You only need a minute with each to get the idea.

The difference is stark. *Flood* is grungy. The colors are muted, muddled, and earthy. People enslaved in some sort of cave watch a green face on a screen. The music moves from pensive pain to fist-clecnghin anguish. Sure, you could imagine a cynic laughing at the God talk, but they couldn't laugh at the tone. It's not naive. It's not corporate. It takes the *potential* purposeless of life apart from God seriously.

Up! is *Flood's* audio-visual antithesis. Forrest Frank is having fun. He's exuberant. Yes, he's conscious that it's silly. He's not naive. But he's not embarrassed by his own ebullience. The music video is colorful and vibrant. Frank is dancing inside a hot air balloon's envelope, smiling and high-fiving with his collaborator, Connor Price. The music compliments the visual mood, mixing hip-hop vocals, bossa nova beats, and a mariachi band backup band.

It's hard to imagine someone from the era of Jars of Clay finding anything appealing about *Up!* It's too sincere, too credulous, and too hopeful. Frank knows the postmodern critique all to well. He sings, "I know some people gonna look at me crazy." His response? "I'm like 'So what man. I was stuck.'"

Both songs share a message, but the mode of expression could not be more different. They're windows into *very* different cultural moods. To be clear, I'm not saying that the metamodern moment is all happy-clappy exuberance. Billie Eilish, arguably the biggest metamodern superstar, proves otherwise. What I am saying is that cringy emotional expressions are now cool. To misquote Forrest Frank: *I know it looks crazy, but I don't care, man.* With over 70 million streams (almost unheard of for a Christian song), it's obvious that plenty of metamoderns agree. They've embraced the cringe.

Paul challenged the Corinthians to make their worship comprehensible to outsiders (1 Cor. 14:23-25). So what does that mean in a metamodern world? Hopeful aesthetics and expression matter. Cringe is in. I can only speak to my own experience, where we've seen the shift in our own service. In the past, worship was largely unexpressive, so as not to freak out septics. But we've changed. Hands and bodies and all.

Again, to riff on Frank: If you don't worship like it's real, so what? "Like it's real" can mean many things in many contexts. I'm not saying we should chase trends. But I do hope your theology of worship will inform how you pursue what it looks like to worship "Like it's real." Robes and stoles are cringy, but so what. If it's real, lean in. Tears and raised hands are cringy, but so what. If it's real, lean in. To hell with cynicism. What does it look like to color our worship with the full range of cringy, sincere emotional expression?

All of that said, our worship must also challenge metamodern culture. Just as there can be a "Chosen reality," there can also be a "Chosen hope." The mother in *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once* chooses to hope in her relationship with her daughter, even though she knows

it's irrational. (There are a million alternate realities in which that hope bears no fruit, so why should one reality matter?) This is why the "chosen hopes" of metamodern people can easily shade into absurd optimism that amounts to little more than positive thinking.

Our worship must challenge metamodern culture to see that there is *real* hope, and that *real* hope is appealing precisely because it doesn't whitewash reality. It's not irrational or absurd. Real hope knows pain and disappointment and yet continues seeking forward, following the scent of God's promised future. Han writes, "Unlike positive thinking, hope does not turn away from the negative aspects of life." It knows darkness, and that makes the brightness all the brighter. Real hope responds to a postmodern culture of anxiety by binding people together in an onward striding toward a God-guaranteed future.

Conclusion

I hope this series begins a conversation about ministry in a post-postmodern context. None of our suggestions should be taken as universal prescriptions. Likewise, I suspect that regionality will play a role in determining to what degree modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism influence a local culture. It's helpful to remember that all three *can* and *do* co-exist.

But I believe that metamodernism is rapidly becoming the loudest voice in our culture—and it's the voice we've spent the least time understanding. The challenge for pastors, missiologists, and cultural apologists is similar: we must learn to read our times well, so that this age might experience (as those before it) a fresh missionary encounter with the good news of King Jesus.

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Patrick Miller

Patrick Miller (MDiv, Covenant Theological Seminary) is a pastor at The Crossing. He offers cultural commentary and interviews with leading Christian thinkers on the podcast Truth Over Tribe, and is the coauthor of the forthcoming book Truth Over Tribe: Pledging Allegiance to the Lamb, Not the Donkey or the Elephant. He is married to Emily and they have two kids.