

Discipleship in a Postmodern World: Lessons from a Premodern Era

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Paper presented at the November 2007 ETS meeting. Response to David Wells' plenary address.

I was instructed that our responses were not to be merely critique, but rather framed as creative alternatives. Actually, I would like to frame my response as precisely an application of David Wells' presentation. How, in a globalized world, can we as evangelical Christians address the concerns Dr. Wells raises regarding our affluent and knowledge-softened context? What practical steps can we take to become disciples in this postmodern culture, specifically with regard to the issues of truth, authenticity, and a global vision? I will first suggest five practical lessons that are available to those of us who wish to reach back into the premodern era. In fact, all five of these historical lessons are wedded to a single institution or expression of life common to premodern Christianity, but notably missing in modern evangelical Protestantism. I will suggest that perhaps it is time we seek a renewal of this expression of life in evangelicalism today. In doing so, I will point to particular examples of this renewal taking place in our midst, providing hopeful signs that, in fact, Dr. Well's call for a biblical discipleship — both in his presentation here today and in his book, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* — is being heard.

Lesson One – The Rule of Life

Dr. Wells points specifically to the shallow nature of postmodern culture, without depth or boundaries.

Speaking in *Above all Earthly Powers*, Dr. Wells writes, of the “the wrenching relocation of the self, away from what is eternal, unchanging, and enduring, and into what is shifting, faddish, and ephemeral” (AAEP, 43), and of the “decentered” character of the self in postmodern culture. Today he spoke of the self constantly under construction. Where do we find guides to help us ground our selves in the unchanging in the midst of a changing world? How can we become disciples who are rooted deeply in the context of a very shallow world?

The Christians who lived in the fourth century faced their own chaotic changes. Having survived the persecutions and the widely pluralistic environment of the first two and a half centuries of the Christian era, they were threatened by Barbarian invasions — a flood of foreign peoples and worldviews. They also faced a new threat from within. Shallowness. The Constantinian recognition of Christianity as a legitimate religion permitted open and unprecedented growth. But many of those who entered the doorway of the Christian faith did so without the depth of understanding or commitment as their forebears. And so Post-Nicene Christianity struggled with uncertainty, pluralism and superficiality.

How did the faithful disciples maintain their center in this de-centered environment? Some responded by documenting both their primary values and those specific practices which would witness to the centrality of their Christ-centeredness. These people committed to live according to those values and practices so documented in the context of accountable relationships with others. This documentation and life-practice was ultimately called a “Rule of Life.”

The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality defines a rule as “a document, usually composed by the founder of a monastery or religious order, that determines the particular ends of the foundation and the principle means by which these ends are to be attained, and contains norms and regulations that guide the life of members of the community” (Joseph T. Lienhard, “Rules” in *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* ed. by Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 340). The early rules — and the constitutions that later accompanied them — frequently presented the vision or “charism” of the community, specified regulations for joining a community, and prescribed their rhythm of life and prayer. Formation into a monastic community was and is anything but an ephemeral “choice of the self.” The process is long. It is designed to see if a given person “fits” the

Christian ideals as expressed in a given community. By means of “Rules,” religious orders like the Benedictines and the Franciscans have been able to maintain a deeply lived and influential Christ-centeredness in the midst of superficiality and radical cultural changes.

Lesson Two – The Vow of Poverty

A second concern voiced by Dr. Wells had to do with our affluent lifestyle. It is not only that we are a culture of victims of the greed that Paul calls “idolatry,” but also that consumption plays such a large role in our own self-formation.

He writes in *Above all Earthly Powers*, “This is Western freedom and Western commercialized culture. Here, we have the ability to hope for what we want, shop where we want, buy what we want, study where we want, think what we want, believe what we want, and treat religion as just another commodity, a product to be consumed. The reality is that modern consumption is not simply about shopping because what we are buying is not simply goods and services. Modern consumption is about buying meaning for ourselves” (AAEP, 77).

Dr. Wells is right. Certainly we Westerners live in times of abundance, an abundance that shapes the very way we see ourselves. We are not, however, the first culture to experience an abundance of wealth. And we are not the first expression of Christianity to be confronted with our relationship to wealth and possessions. Indeed, we have struggled with our wealth ever since Christ’s call to the rich young ruler to sell all and follow him (and since Clement of Alexandria’s reflections on this passage in his famous, *Who is the Rich Man That Will Be Saved?*, written a little over a century later). The fact of history is that many in the Christian Church solved their tensions with the influence of affluence simply by making a commitment — a vow — of simplicity, frugality, or “poverty” as it is officially labeled now. The pervasiveness of this solution in the early Church can be demonstrated by summarizing a section of the opening passage of Eusebius’ well known *Proof of the Gospel*, written around 313AD.

He writes: Two ways of life were thus given by the Lord to His Church. The one is beyond common human living; it admits not property nor the possession of wealth... And the more humble, more human way allows them to have minds for farming, for trade and for the other more secular interests as well as for religion.” (Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 1.8, *Patrologia Graeca* 22:76C, in W.J. Ferrar, trans., *Eusebius: The Proof of the Gospel*, 1:48).

We have a rich heritage of those who have lived a life of committed simplicity. I urge you to explore the history of voluntary simplicity: what this commitment has meant for people’s own sense of self and how that commitment has facilitated an influence for Christ well-beyond normal expectations. Suffice it to say that to commit to a life of simplicity is to subvert the entire culture which says, by its plethora of consumer options, “You are what you buy.” In vowed Christian poverty we discover that in Christ, you are much, much more than that. What does it mean to “follow Christ”? Jesus asked the rich young ruler first to sell all and give to the poor and then to follow. Perhaps we are being asked the same question today.

Lesson Three – The Divine Office

Dr. Wells has made it clear. We are, in our globalized consumerist culture, in danger of degenerating into relativism. He calls for a new “hearing” of the authoritative text of Scripture. But he calls not simply for a specific hermeneutic, but rather of a knowledge both of the text of God and of the God of the text. In *Above All Earthly Powers*, he calls this hearing of God in text a “summons.” He writes, “And in the absence of a divine and personal summons through the Word of God there is only the impersonal vortex that threatens to absorb everything into one undifferentiated mass” (AAEP, 176). How do we, in a postmodern world, re-hear the text of God and the God of the text once again? Together?

I’d like us to try a brief experiment with this kind of re-hearing right now. I will read the first three verses of the first Psalm. Then I will give you a minute to think about it. Then I will pray something which is brought to mind through the hearing and thinking. Then we will be silent for a moment. A reading from Psalm 1.

1 Blessed is the man

who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.

Whatever he does prospers.

[Now take a minute and think about it.]

[Pray it]

[Silence]

This pattern — reading aloud (and “hearing”) a text of Scripture, thinking about it, praying it, and sitting in the silence of God’s presence in the midst of the text — has been one of the primary elements of monastic life from its inception. Augustine, Benedict, Francis all mention the public hearing and the private meditation or study of the Word. This mix of public and private, verbal, mental, and silent exercises our relationship to the text and to God at all levels. Jean Leclercq, in his wonderful *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, writes of this practice: “For the ancients, to meditate is to read a text and to learn it “by heart” in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one’s whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice.” (Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, translated by Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 17).

This placing of one’s self before Scripture and before God together in prayerful reading/response is done every day (and usually between two and seven times per day) in virtually all religious orders. The practice of these hours of reading and prayer are known as The Divine Office. Robert Taft, in his monumental history of the Divine Office, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, asks the question, “why the Church has blessed precisely this form of prayer as her daily prayer par excellence?” He answers, “Undoubtedly many reasons could be advanced to prove the excellence of the office, but three stand out in my mind: the Divine Office is biblical, objective, traditional prayer.” I agree with Taft. Through the divine office, we link ourselves with the authoritative text of God, we enter in through the millenia old tradition of the Church’s prayer, and we encounter through this means the objective mystery of Jesus Christ, the God of the text.

Lesson Four – Initial and Ongoing Formation

What does it mean to be authentic? Dr. Wells argues that postmodern culture is about fleeting images, not real authenticity. He writes in *Above All Earthly Powers*, “We are but the pieces of confetti that flutter down, each on its own erratic course, none joined to the others, none connected, but each making its own solitary way through the air” (AAEP, 250). Dr. Wells has told us that “Being authentic is the indispensable key to Christian credibility.”

So be it. My question is, how can we today as evangelical believers witness to a biblical authenticity? How can we bring together Scripture-inspired dreams and Spirit-empowered disciplines into a process of formation that produces, in the language of today, something that is “real”? George Maloney writes the following in his introduction to the writings of Russian monk Nils Sorsky: “The monk had to have a conscious understanding of the goal of perfection and the means most suitable to attain it, along with a willing determination to arrive at that end. Therefore, the individual monk had to understand and be convinced of the instructions given him. Then, by force of conviction, he had to put them into practice in his life.” (George A. Maloney, SJ, *Nil Sorsky: The Complete Writings* (Paulist Press, 2003), 19).

We get a vision for the goal of the spiritual life: perfection, maturity. We choose the means most suitable to that end, those practices or relationships that will most likely facilitate growth. Then we intend that end: with a willing determination we decide, we commit to reach that aim. Dallas Willard, in his *Renovation of the Heart*, lists these in a

slightly different order: Vision, Intention, Means. This is discipleship. There are, as the quote mentioned, “the instructions.” The monastic life is lived in the context of accountable relationships. We call this “spiritual direction.” There is the “understanding” of the instructions. We call this “discernment.” The tradition and practice of discernment runs deep and long in monastic circles. And then we put them into practice. We call this, “discipline.” Vision, intention, means; direction, discernment, discipline. Together they form the basic structure of formation in religious life. How do we become disciples who are rich in the lived-experience of God and the Word, but is authentic to the context in which we live today? I can offer no better suggestion than the practice of religious formation.

Lesson Five – Incarnational Relocation

Our final lesson from the premodern era has to do with Dr. Wells’ call for a global vision. He spoke specifically about our new global neighbors, especially in the inner city. And in *Above All Earthly Powers* he states “The mission field, as missionaries used to think of it, is increasingly relocating, at least for short periods and sometimes much longer times, to the West and not least to America” (AAEP, 312). He speaks of “new doors of opportunity” and especially in our cities and especially among those of need. How are we to respond to this mission call?

Once again we can learn from the premodern era. How did Christians respond to this kind of mission call in earlier centuries? Here we could cover the hospitality of the Benedictines, the Celtic expansion of Christianity, or the work of the Dominicans and the Franciscans among the European poor. Again and again we see communities of Christians taking concrete steps to be in the midst of those who need the Gospel, to live among them in an authentically Christian life and through that life to bring Christ to others. Those who were followers of Jesus followed him into the presence of widows, Samaritans, and lepers. Will we follow him there today?

The Need for Evangelical Religious Orders in a Postmodern World

As you by now have realized, the single expression of Christian life that ties all these lessons together is the institution of religious orders. It is interesting to think that from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries, Christian religious orders played a significant role in the preservation, development, and spread of Christianity. The monasteries preserved Christian documents during the “Dark Ages.” Significant advances in theology, in devotion, and in community life were pioneered by religious orders. Friars and Monks led the way in evangelism. Key theologians and leaders of the Church were members of religious orders. One could even argue that, when Christianity was at its best, it was led, in the premodern era, by religious.

In the modern period, from the sixteenth through the twenty-first centuries, religious life has played less of a role. The foundation of the Jesuits and the development of a wide range of apostolic congregations led to an expansion of compassionate and missionary activity led by religious. But in both the Roman and the Orthodox traditions, modern religious life was, for the most part, sequestered off into an idealized fringe of the Church. And in the Protestant tradition, there was, in the formal sense, no religious life to be found. Outside of a few Anglican, Lutheran, and ecumenical orders (and some of these more recently founded), there has been no voice of religious life from the Protestant tradition.

Ralph Winter, in a 1971 article for the *American Society of Missiology* asked the question of mission strategy. His question was, “Is there “a more excellent way”?” His answer is as follows, “The writer is convinced that the Roman Catholic tradition, in its much longer experience with the phenomenon of the “order,” embodies a superior structural approach to both renewal and mission.” Ralph Winter, president of the American Society of Missiology in *Missiology: An International Review* Vol VII, Bo. 2 (April, 1979) 141.

Tom Sine, author of InterVarsity Press’ best-selling book on apologetics, *The Universe Next Door* has issues a similar call, following the lead of Richard Mouw. Sine writes, “Richard Mouw, provost at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, has said that the Church would benefit from a “remonasticization,” creating smaller lay orders within the church and “calling the entire Church to a clearer and more radical witness... I would go further than Mouw. I believe that a return to a radical idea of Community is essential to the renewal and the survival of a vital church in the western nations. The only way we can win the battle against the encroaching waves of modernization is to launch a counteroffensive which will establish lay orders, radical Christian communities, and new human

settlements that reflect the values of God's new order instead of the obsessions of American culture." Tom Sine, *Creating New Visions for a New Millennium*, in *Green Cross* (Summer 1990) 23.

Throughout the modern era, there had been virtually no voice of religious orders from the Protestant tradition. Until recently. Here we are, at the onset of what many are calling a "postmodern" era, and we are exploring "new monasticism." I can point to a number of communities of largely young people relocating in the midst of the world's inner-cities. These folk are writing monastic rules, saying the divine office, and making commitments to voluntary simplicity. I know a community of houses in North Carolina that gather from their different houses for morning and evening prayer. I know an Australian-based order that lives among local East-Timorese refugees. Another US-based order makes a vow of simplicity and draws a number of its novices from evangelical college graduates. Some of these orders have explicit programs of formation, leading from visitor to intern to novice to long-term commitment. Some of these groups integrate solid theological training with practical ministry experience. I could go on and on.

Protestant evangelicalism grew up without any models of religious life in its own tradition, and yet the institution of monasticism was vital to the life of the premodern Church. Dr. Wells has called us to a renewed authenticity rooted in the truth and the life of the Christian faith. What does it mean to be a disciple in a postmodern world? Is there a place for an evangelical monasticism? It may not be the only answer to the dilemmas of Christian witness in contemporary culture, but I think it's worth a try.