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Young People and Faith: Encountering God "In All Things"

Abstract

"The Word of God must never be used as 'propaganda' or a weapon to be used against 'enemies.'"

Posting about helping young people experience God from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/young-people-and-faith-encountering-god-in-all-things/>

Keywords

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Young People and Faith: Encountering God “In All Things”

 inallthings.org/young-people-and-faith-encountering-god-in-all-things/

Jason Lief

In *You Lost Me: Why Young People are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith*, David Kinnaman unpacks the deeper issues behind the current research on young people and religious belief. He explores how the cultural changes over the last fifty years have led to a seismic shift in the way young people approach issues of faith, arguing that they are leaving traditional forms of Christianity because their questions are not being addressed and their experiences are not taken seriously. Kinnaman provides examples of young people, or “mosaics” as he calls them, who are less interested in the “party line” on issues like evolution, gender, and sexuality, and much more interested in the way faith relates to a new cultural paradigm. Undeterred, the church continues to give answers to questions young people aren’t asking, which, he argues, means young people are forced to look elsewhere.

Increasingly, young people — both Christian and non-Christian — seek out experiences of the sacred in the context of creaturely life. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman refers to this phenomenon as an obsession with “peak experiences.” Think about the number of young people who dedicate their lives to base jumping, mountain climbing, urban renewal, mission trips, social justice, rock music — the list goes on. No longer is God confined to a particular location — a church, a liturgy, even the sacraments or scripture; they no longer believe the pastorate or the priesthood is a higher, more spiritual calling. Instead, God is found in the experiences of this world — a postmodern spirituality in which the sacred is intricately woven into creaturely life.

And there it is: postmodernism. I don’t care what you call it; call it late modernity, hyper modernity, or contemporary culture if it makes you feel better. Whatever it’s called let’s admit the landscape has changed. Surprisingly, within this postmodern situation young people may be closer to a reformational perspective than we think. After all, reformational types use phrases like “in all things” and “every square inch” to show that the division between sacred and secular is a false binary. They use these mantras as a way to take the cultural aspect of human life very seriously. Maybe young people are finally, once and for all, breaking down the sacred/secular distinction; maybe they actually believe human beings can encounter God through the experiences of this creaturely life.

Christians can respond to this postmodern situation in different ways. We can adopt a “two kingdoms” stance that builds up walls as we congratulate ourselves for giving answers to questions no one is asking. Or we can embrace the reformational perspective that believes God, in Jesus Christ, is present in the midst of this world, at the center of human experience with all of its diversity and complexity. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer harshly criticized what he saw as the relegation of God to the boundaries of human existence. By sticking God, salvation, and faith in the spiritual realm, the material or cultural realm came to be governed by human reason and scientific inquiry. Bonhoeffer insists that the God of the Bible does not exist outside of human cultural experience; God is, instead shown to be “beyond in the midst of our life.” In Jesus Christ God inhabits the center of human experience, affirming creaturely life within this world. Consequently, this means that the church as the body of Christ must also inhabit this center by sharing in “the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving” (*Letters and Papers* pp. 382-83). This means that, in Jesus Christ, God is not opposed to the cultural aspects of human life; God loves and embraces it.

This leads to an important question: What if, instead of insisting on controlling the questions and the answers, the church came alongside young people and affirmed their experience of God in the world? What Bonhoeffer realized as he sat in his prison cell is that the liturgical and confessional life of the church is not separate from cultural life — it is not concerned with some higher spiritual existence; the purpose of the liturgy is to conform us to the new humanity of Jesus Christ, awakening us to the presence of God in midst of this world. He goes so far as to refer to the liturgical life of the church as a “secret discipline” in the context of Jesus teaching about praying to our Father “who is in secret” (Matthew 6:6). He writes, “Confession of faith is not to be confused with professing a religion. Such profession uses the confession as propaganda and ammunition against the Godless. The confession of faith belongs rather to the ‘Discipline of the Secret’ in the Christian gathering of those who believe” (“The Nature of the Church” *Testament of Freedom* p. 86). He goes on to say that the Word of God must never be used as “propaganda” or a weapon to be used against “enemies”, instead he says that the “Word must be preserved as the most sacred possession of the community. This is a matter between God and the community, not between the community and the world. It is a word of recognition between friends... The deed alone is our confession of faith before the world” (“The Nature of the Church” *Testament of Freedom* p. 86).

The Christian community must be willing to take the postmodern faith of young people seriously by affirming their experience of God in the midst of cultural life. This doesn't mean giving up on liturgical worship, it simply means recognizing the true purpose of liturgy as it opens our eyes to God's presence in this world, allowing the Word and Sacrament to confirm the promise God's gives us in Jesus Christ. The task of the Christian community is to come alongside young people in the midst of their experiences, inviting them to come to the table so together we might taste and see that the Lord is good as our eyes are opened to the God who greets us in our creaturely life.