Engaging Society: Teaching Christian Values to Non-Christians
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1. Introduction
Post-apartheid South Africa is exciting, challenging, and desperate. Exciting because human dignity has been restored; desperate because there will not be quick delivery of a better life; challenging because our country has become a values vacuum. Values are being increasingly corroded, even forgotten. Postmodernism seems to be getting us into an ever-deepening quagmire. What is to be done as a Christian, in South African society? This article is a personal reflection on the pilgrimage of half a lifetime of learning how to be an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ in a postmodern age. It is also a particular case study involving my work with Scripture Union. I offer it to travellers moving into the twenty-first century who are willing to engage society in new and adventurous ways.

1.1 Engaging society: the true charge of the gospel
It has again become acceptable for evangelicals to talk about the gospel as saving and liberating in both personal and social realms without fear of being labelled a “liberation theologian”. Clearly, human needs are physical, spiritual, emotional and social. Jesus engaged society as a whole, people as whole people, not merely souls in need of regeneration. In fact, Jesus spent as much time feeding the poor, healing the sick and addressing the government as He did calling people to repentance. We must do the same.

1.2 The human dilemma
People in society face a dilemma. They find it difficult to know how to address the tough issues (sin, pain or both) of their lives, and even more to engage with Christians who comprise a sub-culture largely foreign, and who are often insensitive and out of touch with the reality of the lives of their non-Christian peers. There is a Jewish legend in the Talmud about a king who had a wayward son which parallels the New Testament account of the prodigal son, yet offers a poignant insight. The son had gone away to a far country. After a while the man sent word to his son... “Return home,” the Father said. “I cannot,” came the reply from the son. “Come as far as you can” replied the Father, “and I will come the rest of the way to meet you” (Potok 1966:preface). The story is simple, the implications profound. We have to be prepared to meet people (and organised institutions of society) where they are and move them from that point to the resolution the gospel brings. We cannot expect non-Christians to begin behaving like Christians, to “come all the way” if you like, before we engage them with respect and understanding. The modern New Testament paraphrase The Message expresses John 1:14 helpfully here - “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.” I am daring to suggest we follow suit.

1.3 The place of Christian values in a secular society
When I speak of engaging society, it is my firm conviction that we have a duty to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” (Jer 29:7) in which we are living. We do so by urging individuals and societies to adopt that set of values which minimises harmful consequences and improves the quality of life for all. We should never attempt to impose on a pagan society Christian values which do not fulfill these criteria, ie those values which Christians hold to only because they are in relationship to God. Examples of these are laws of church discipline, beliefs about alcohol, crude language, church attendance and Sunday trade. It seems clear that the Bible provides us with a code of conduct which is not arbitrary but given the God who created us, knows and understands us and designed us to function in particular ways in relationship with each other, the earth and himself. That is why we teach non-Christians Christian values, rather than because we want them to be socially acceptable to our Christian sub-culture.

2. A Case Study
The present state of youth in South Africa is generally dismal. Young people live in the midst of many negative influences and often within a hostile environment. Unemployment, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, AIDS, poverty, family breakdown, moral decay, sexual abuse, rampant materialism, crime, family violence, drug-abuse, rebellion against authority, corruption, lack of role-models (especially in the townships as many move away) and sub-standard education, are all factors with which they must contend in the struggle to grow up.

Recent surveys of 15 year-olds have shown that 17% have engaged in sexual activity; 7% use dagga regularly; 20% have seriously contemplated suicide; 53% have used alcohol; 15% said they get drunk regularly; 25% of young people interviewed knew someone who had been raped or physically beaten up; a quarter of a million young people have been sexually abused as children and a quarter of a million have been physically abused (Swartz 1995:33). These statistics reflect the dismal state of youth in South Africa today.

2.1 The Scripture Union (SU) Lifeskills story
Into this context SU embarked on a strategy to address youth problems in general and AIDS in particular by giving young people the skills they need to understand and act on the issues which they face daily. The programme focuses on skills training in the areas of decision-making, goal-setting, communication, self-image, peer-influence, compassion and community involvement. Some of the topics covered include sex, sexuality, abuse, love, exploitation, HIV and self-worth. The programme, entitled All the Right Moves, attempts to give young people between the ages of 10 and 15 hope in the face of the dismal prognosis of the AIDS pandemic by helping them withstand sexual pressure and grow up with a positive view of marriage and a responsible view of sexuality.

Using members of the local community as facilitators, the course is presented by trained workers during schools’ formal programmes and at special Lifeskills camps. Depending on the time available the course varies in length from intensive four-day camps to twelve weeks. It has been running in schools for the past five years and the results have been very encouraging. We began developing resources in 1991 in consultation with youth specialists, health and educational authorities, parents, and communities of young people themselves. We have received numerous endorsements from educational and business communities. More importantly, we have had good responses from the young people we have sought to reach with the programme, and our evaluation study has proven the programme effective.
2.2 Success in a secular society

There are aspects of our strategy which I believe have significantly contributed to our success in a secular society. One key feature has been understanding and researching the context of our target audience. A second has been enlisting Christian professionals to aid in articulating the rationale for our strategy, not in Christian paralee but in “scientific jargon”.

Adrian Pinington, a board member who is also a well-known and respected actuary in South Africa developed a model for us showing the relative impact of a values message versus the current prophylactic message (condom distribution). The model shows the effects of various intervention efforts in curbing the AIDS pandemic. Although condom intervention with sustained and consistently correct usage, will be more successful at preventing infections in the short term, in the longer term sustained closed sexual relationship lifestyles emerge as being most successful. Clearly Lifeskills programmes will not only curb the spread of HIV, but will eventually cause the epidemic to drop off relative to the projected incidence of HIV infections, as predicted by the Doyle Model. This will take time - but it is a solution rather than a stop-gap. Short-term interventions, such as condom promotion, on the other hand, will at best succeed only in slowing down the rate of infections.

The key to the development of this model was our evaluation of the success of the programme. Our results proved that Lifeskills education, although slower than other intervention efforts, will have a sustained long-term effect and will reduce the incidence of HIV amongst young adults. We argued that young people between the ages of five and fifteen are currently relatively HIV-free. This is the window of opportunity. If intervention can be effective amongst this age group then the prospects are good for decreasing the effects of AIDS on this generation. We maintained that our efforts were proving effective in widening this window of hope for the following reasons:

Prior to the course 42% of the teenagers questioned were determined to keep sex for marriage. By the end of the course the number had risen to 76%, an increase in commitment of 80%.

Decision-making skills show marked improvement. We also discovered that most young people have good values, but often lack the ability to translate these values into behaviour which reflects these values and lack the skills to communicate these values to others.

The teens' understanding of their individual ability to make their own choices has improved from 55% to 72% of those tested - a growth of nearly 50%. Furthermore, by the end of the course 60% had decided to stand up for their values and felt competent to resist pressure from friends and the media. We published our results in various mediums, open to professional scrutiny and the result... credibility in a secular society.

3. Principles for Engaging Society from the SU Lifeskills Story

3.1 Start with the agenda of people to whom one is seeking to minister

In Philippians 2:4 we are exhorted to “look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”. Although the context indicates that this refers to our relationships with other Christians, this text may also have relevance in our context of “engagement”. The primary way in which we accomplish the intention of the text is to observe and listen. We must be committed to listening to people to hear what is on their agenda and what is happening in their world.

3.2 Be contextual; begin with what unites us

Have found it extremely effective to begin with shared experience. Move from there to specific ethics. Use an apologetic approach that leads people to accept that the ethics suggested are beneficial before pointing out that these are biblical norms. It is pointless to appeal to non-Christians on the basis of the authority of a God with whom they have no relationship. The commands of God however are not arbitrary, and people can be made to recognise that they are good, before it is pointed out that they are godly. We must not teach what the Bible does not teach on matters such as murder, alcohol, gambling, etc. Christians must hold to the truth of the Bible, but we can do so obnoxiously or graciously. The first approach is seen in those who see no room for debate in the abortion issue, who cannot differentiate between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice, who refuse to debate issues and who will not attempt to discover the reasons behind God's commands. Many are being deceived by people who hold to lies but do so graciously. We need to hold to the truth in a gracious manner if we are to truly engage society.

3.3 Relational confrontation

Challenge and confrontation are most successful within the context of relationships based upon respect. In SU the key philosophy is “winning the right to speak”. When we run the Lifeskills course at a school, that school has asked us to teach Lifeskills, not preach salvation, and we respect that. In the classroom we invite the students to come and hear specifically about Christ at a voluntary meeting. With this approach we have even gained entry into Muslim-headed schools.

We have articulated a statement of intent with which each school is presented:

The Christian ethic permeates our message and while we aim to secure a commitment to Christian values, further specific spiritual guidance will be given at the request of participants only. At all times our approach to young people will be sensitive and respectful and our participation in the school's formal programme will recognise the mandate given by school authorities.

We have developed programme materials which differentiate between universalism and multi-faith. We believe it is constitutional to believe and propagate a set of specific religious beliefs even if these beliefs are in conflict with the beliefs of others, provided the propagation is voluntary and the person agrees to hear from you (i.e. people agree to listening to our persuasion). In addition we are committed to respecting those whose beliefs differ from ours.

We have also done substantial work in differentiating between a “moral certainties” approach and a moralistic programme. “Moral certainties” explores various options based on universal truths whereas moralism is often characterised by judgementalism, coercion, and the cultivation of guilt to encourage compliance.

Recent research (Raths, Harning & Simons) has concluded that the following criteria will have to be present if we are to earn certain values:
Choosing
1. To choose freely
2. To choose from alternatives
3. To choose from alternatives after the implications of these choices have been worked out.

Prizing
4. Cherishing and being happy with the choice (celebrating)
5. Wishing to affirm the choice publically (championing)

Acting
6. Actually doing something with the choice.
7. Acting repeatedly in some pattern of life so it becomes a reflex action.

We have been at pains to ensure that these criteria are met.

3.4 Formation versus prescription

In South Africa it has become politically incorrect to be prescriptive in education, but formative education is encouraged. SU’s educational approach is formative rather than prescriptive. We aim to convince young people that they should adopt that set of values that will place them at least risk of harm and moreover give them the opportunity to reach their potential and embark on a happy, healthy and confident adulthood.

We explain and help them to discover the consequences of different choices. We do not have to coerce, but watch them discover best options as they challenge and internalise for themselves. We do not scare people into adopting values or behaviour. Our role is a coaching role. We refuse to use scare tactics or to slate other options (eg. condom usage) and prefer to believe that the way to overcome night is to “light a candle rather than curse the darkness.”

Finally, we refuse to accept that providing information alone is education. There is no such thing as a value-neutral approach. Too many people today are advocating a value neutral education. This, in fact, teaches all the wrong values about sexuality i.e., that sex is purely a physical act; that it has no consequences (provided you escape STDs and pregnancy), and that sex is a technical skill rather than a moral act. It fails to address the emotional, social and spiritual aspects of human sexuality. Much of today’s sex education gives young people inadequate knowledge. SU’s formative education helps develop character and empowers young people. For many young people it will be an objective, reasoned choice because they will have time. We can no longer challenge them before becoming sexually active or committed to ongoing sexual activity.

3.5 Professionalism versus good intentions

Christians are often very busy people. Many have executive jobs and are on numerous church and service agency boards and councils. When it comes to engaging society it is my strong contention that we must be committed to excellence and professionalism. Postmoderns are used to professionalism and have much to capture their attention. When we engage society it must be in a professional and strategic manner and this takes time. Christians may be forgetting that society will ignore our best intentions. Only skillful presentations, cutting-edge programmes, well-written submissions and sustained protest will capture the attention of busy politicians, town councillors, educators and businesspeople. Good intentions are not enough. They must be translated into action.

3.6 Creative Solutions

Many people can decry the wrong in society, few take the time to articulate their unhappiness and fewer still have creative solutions to offer. Often I am embarrassed at the apparent ignorance and laziness of many in ministry. Those on the receiving end of protests or submissions seldom see the busy-ness and lack of resources with which many Christians have to contend. They see only the result - often slipshod, un-researched and uncoordinated action. It is imperative that this trend be reversed, even if it means slowing down the rate of protest or engagement for the sake of making a meaningful impact on fewer issues.

Research is often facilitated by participation in networks. Pastors ought to be fully involved in civic society and should keep up with reading on current issues and sociology. It is not enough to only preach the word, we must also be fully acquainted with the context into which the word is to be received. It is time to take the hermeneutical spiral very seriously rather than getting stuck on the exegesis of the text, which, while important, is not sufficient without application into the context of the listeners.

Our engagement must also be creative. It must offer actual solutions, at whatever level. Let us as a recent example, the Baptist Union Christian Citizenship submission to the Publications Control Board. The Board was inundated with submissions from Christians merely deploring the fact that the new Publications Control Act was immoral because it was not in keeping with biblical principles, to which their response was “in a secular society it does not have to be in keeping with biblical principles”. We searched for an argument which would carry a different emphasis (and not merely lump us into the “religious right” category) and after some research asked the Board to include in the act a preamble as follows: “The review board in evaluating publications will respect, honour and be guided by those moral values held to by the majority of the people of South Africa.” In support we used the Canadian “community standards” precedent which argued for regular opinion polls in local communities which was used to articulate a set of local community standards by which the board was to be guided. In addition, if objections were raised by people from a particular geographical area, then the publication should be submitted to a local “council” elected from amongst the community which is raising the objection to the publication. Their judgement should be accepted by the board, no matter what the board’s previous decision has been. Of course an obvious flaw would be that if a community consisted largely of paedophiles then child pornography would be rampant, but it would be excluded from communities where a moral majority prevailed and it would protect societies who wanted to be protected from unwarranted exposure.

This leaves a space for Christians to lobby the community; bring information to the attention of local people and teach and educate people, all in the knowledge that such action would influence and limit the power of the Publications Control Board. We also argued for a moral basis for the act by saying:

Surely if the entire Act has no moral frame of reference we are totally at the mercy of a person or a group of people who at any given stage may decide what is harmful or is not harmful, without any objective benchmark. It is therefore our very strong opinion that legislation concerning Publications Control should, by very definition, have a moral frame of reference. The fact that we are advocating legislation for Publications Control, means that as a country we are agreeing that certain areas of public life need to be governed by boundaries and controls and therefore through legislation.

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In a secular society it is imperative to argue, not only "because the Bible says so" but because it has implications for society and then to provide creative alternatives.

3.7 Sustained methods of engagement

Engaging society is tough. It is a long road. Our submission was largely ignored, but the process taught me the principle of thinking from an apologetic rather than a "we-have-the-right-to-insist-that-society-be-governed-by-biblical-principles-approach".

In SU we have also realized that our programmes must compete with what is on offer in the secular market, and in fact should attempt to be better than secular alternatives and even be on the cutting-edge of innovation. For this reason we designed our Lifeskills programme to be skill-based, even when it was not the norm.

Advocacy is a long arduous task, in which we seek to chip away at a large granite block of postmodern values. It is my contention that this type of engagement with society is far superior to sporadic protests or explosions of activism. Jesus moved into the neighbourhood, he didn't merely bus in to the protest.

4. Finding Our Place in Society

4.1 Soft skills: a unique role for the faith community

In a recent strategic planning exercise, SU consulted with many groups of young adults around South Africa on its role and that of the church in society. There was a ground-swell of support for SU and the church being far more involved in "social development" while still retaining a strong evangelistic thrust. SU and the church must not become a welfare agency but should rather integrate the "social ethics/Lifeskills" approach with divine evangelism. We should teach "soft skills" (values) rather than hard skills (job creation projects, substance rehabilitation etc). By soft skills I mean teaching youth the basic skills and values which would make them far better equipped to be productive workers, contributing members of society, fair parents and loving spouses.

Soft skills teach youth:

- respect for life - a human rights culture and gender environment based on responsibility and not merely on exclusive privilege; respect for themselves - resulting in a positive self-esteem and healthy behaviour; impulse control - helping them to develop social skills and make a meaningful contribution to building community, rather than self-gratification; good decision-making skills - assisting them to choose a set of values placing them at least risk to HIV infection, substance abuse, crime, unwanted pregnancy and emotional scarring; the value of hard work - to enable them to take their place as part of a productive work force with a wholesome work ethic; tolerance of diversity and respect - which would enable them to be better citizens of a diverse, rainbow nation and contribute to the current process of nation-building in South Africa; spiritual awareness - enabling them to live holistic and balanced lives through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

However, we are not trying to teach people morals in order to make them better people who still go to hell, neither are we merely teaching them morals so that we may have more receptive ground in which to sow the seed of the salvation message (although it may have that effect). Rather, we are teaching people how to choose that set of values which places them at least risk of harm. Morals protect lives, develop character and build nations. Many are currently advocating for its strengthening in our land. Chief Justice Mohammed recently conceded that "the moral fibre of our society has frayed," and in a meeting of church leaders the State President said that the church must not be afraid of teaching morality. Because morals build a nation and protect lives, if teaching social ethics and Lifeskills was all that we did we would be providing a service to society in general and young people in particular. However, it is difficult if not impossible to be moral by sheer willpower. Secondly, the good news is about a new life here and in eternity. The mission of SU and the church must therefore be both evangelism and Lifeskills education. These two do, however, have to be skillfully married in order to retain the integrity of both.

4.2 A truly contextual Gospel

The issues and context of life must not be separated from Christianity. We must not, for example, evangelise on one hand and deal with issues on the other. Nor must we deal with issues without the Gospel or deal with the Gospel without dealing with issues. As Christians committed to engaging society our approach must be totally integrated. We must help people make sense of the present world in which they live and provide them with hope for their future. Finally, perseverance is crucial. Non-Christians do not have to behave like Christians. The trenches of life are tough and mean. We will not always be accepted and when we are it will not be quickly and painlessly. Our vision for society must be clear and focussed, our action sustained and our belief in the relevance of the gospel strong enough to overcome defeat and rejection.

Notes

1. Adrian Pinating is an actuary associated with Swiss-SA Reinsurance.
2. The Doyle Model is now known as the South African Actuarial Society model and was produced by Peter Doyle of Metropolitan Life. It enjoys the status of being a benchmark in actuarial work in South Africa.
3. Subsequently, skill-based and outcomes-based learning have become popular, but SU was certainly amongst the pioneers.

Bibliography

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