The Aftershocks of Postmodernism in Our Leadership
By Dr. John C. Maxwell  Catalyst Conference  Article Highlights

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I pastored a church in California for fifteen years, and I experienced a lot of earthquakes there.
When the news reported that there was another earthquake in California, my friends on the east coast would call, afraid I was buried under rubble somewhere. After a major earthquake occurs, they begin reporting on all the aftershocks. Even though the earth has stopped moving, there are always a few more trembles after the major quake.

I think about that as I look at what’s happened in the church. I think there are some aftershocks of the Postmodern movement that we need to be aware of. But before I take you into some of these aftershocks, let me go back to the “earthquake” itself: the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism. A lot changed in our culture and in the church during that shift:

1. We went from humanism, where we’re the masters of our fate, to fatalism, wherein we have no control over what happens.
2. We went from rationalism to relativism—a movement from truth as absolute to truth is relative, and we each have our own realities.
3. We went from science being the ultimate that will deliver us, to technology, where applications exist to serve our needs.
4. We went from enlightenment to narrative. It’s a shift from, “I want the facts,” to “Give me a story; paint a picture for me.”
5. We went from universal right and wrong, what I call “self evident ethics,” to tolerance, in which everyone is tolerant of everyone else’s values.
6. We went from materialism to spiritualism, from a mindset of believing only in what we can see, to a sense of mysticism in which we believe in invisible realities.
7. We went from individualism, that self-made man persona, to community, being focused more on teamwork and family.

We can no longer do ministry today as we did ministry yesterday. Several years ago, I had a conversation with one of my favorite people, a guy who had been pastor of the same major Atlanta church for thirty-seven years. I asked what it was like having been in the same church, leading the same people, for thirty-seven years, and he said, “The first thing I want to correct is that although I’ve been at the same place for thirty-seven years, it’s not the same church. They’re not the same people; they’ve changed. And not only that, but I’m not the same pastor.” And when you examine the shifts that are explained here, you must understand that for us to effectively make these changes, we must continually be adaptable.

Before the turn of the millennium, I was often asked what I saw in the church as we entered into the twenty-first century. I was asked that question a lot, and I prepared a pretty extensive paper on these trends as I saw them taking place in the church. I spoke about it to a group of pastors, and I could sense heavily their resistance to what I presented. Certainly, I wasn’t saying that the changes were all beneficial, I was just trying to help them understand what was happening. If we are to lead effective ministries, our ministries may have to occasionally change. And as far as
effective ministry is concerned, I think there are some potentially encouraging changes with respect to the aftershocks of Postmodernism.

**Aftershock #1: We’ve gone from Duplication to Integration.**

In the past, we would duplicate a practice in order to get a particular result. In this way, one church would ask, “How do you begin this program?” or “How did you get your congregation to this place?” That church examined how one group did it and then turned around to do it the same way in a different place. Back in 1980, I began what we called the *GRADE Program*, a very simple program of evangelism and discipleship, and after a while there were literally thousands upon thousands of churches that implemented the *GRADE Program* in their churches.

Today we have begun to merge a variety of different concepts, some of them that even seem to be in conflict, to create an even better product. We’ve moved from, on the Duplication side, relying on someone else to give us a system that seems easier and less risky, to, on the Integration side, moving forward without having all the answers but being hungry to grow. We used to want to have the entire system handed to us. Now we’d rather come up with our own process after aggregating many other ideas.

It’s a lot like when the Willow Creek church began. It was so successful, everybody went to Willow Creek to learn how to build a church. The next thing you know, everybody wants to have a drama team, they apologize for taking the offering, they sing three songs then pray then have a sermon – an identical structure to the Willow Creek service. Soon, though, they realized it’s like putting Saul’s armor on David. It just didn’t fit right. Now, when ministries go to Willow Creek and they see a part of their program that they identify with, they take a little bit home and try it out. They might take a little bit of Saddleback, too, or a touch of North Point, and try it out at their church, along with a healthy dose of what already works in their community.

On a personal level, this shift demonstrates itself in the move from wanting to know all the right answers to being okay with not having everything figured out. At a particular lunch I had with Andy Stanley a few years ago, we were getting ready for the Catalyst Conference. Andy told me, “John, I’ve been thinking about my message for Catalyst, and I think I’ve got one that’s going to really help people. I think I’m going to title it ‘Uncertain, But Not Unclear’.” I said, “Andy, who wants to hear a message on that? It doesn’t sound like a leadership message to me. It sounds like a guy that doesn’t have a clue.” He said, “That’s exactly right, because young leaders are uncertain, and they don’t have all the answers.”

A few months later at Catalyst, Andy gave that message and it was a grand slam. He looked at those Next Generation Leaders and said, “There are many times I’m uncertain about what decisions I should make, but I’m never unclear about my vision. I’m not unclear about the direction I want the church to take, even if I’m uncertain about the decision at hand.” He talked about all these uncertainties in his life and his leadership, yet the more uncertainties he talked about, the better they liked it.

**Aftershock #2: We have gone from Achievement to Learning.**

At one time, the big question was “What have you achieved?” but today the most important thing you can ask yourself is “What are you learning?” When we focus on achievement, we forego the focus on the learning process. It used to be that the most significant pursuit of churches was church growth, but now it’s becoming overall church health – what a great example of movement from achievement to a process. Back in the early 80s, a few of my friends and I presented a conference called “Breaking the 200 Barrier,” teaching churches about how to break through to 200 members. Now, we’re all trying to figure out how to break through to 1000, but that’s still
not the end goal. Now, we experience growth and self-discovery while going through the process rather than keeping a checklist. Under the Achieving system there was a myth that arriving was what it was all about; but the truth is, under the Learning paradigm, no one ever arrives.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of personal growth resources. I saw this shift take place personally after I had created one hundred INJOY Life Club audio lessons, and the suggestion was made that we ought to create a kit of the first hundred lessons for pastors to use. I can remember talking to pastors at a conference about personal growth, and I told them that we were making these recordings available, and they start stampeding back to get them. These guys were serious about learning; they’re serious about dedicating themselves to a year-long process of growth. And I realized the difference that a few years made – a pastor used to come and say, “You know, I only have a half a day. Could you just give me a shortcut? Bottom line, help me go build a great church,” and now they say, “I’m willing to spend a whole year listening to lessons to grow and develop myself as a pastor and a leader.”

I was speaking once with a very successful pastor whom I greatly admire, and he said, “John, I’m frustrated.” I asked about the problem, and he said, “Well, I’ve plateaued.” I said, “Well, is your church bigger than you ever thought it was going to be?” He said it was. “Income bigger?” Yes. “More members?” Yes. Everything was bigger – he had hit all of his goals. I explained to him that that was precisely the problem. All of his life had been goal-oriented instead of growth-oriented. When you’re goal-oriented you hit your goals but you don’t camp there, because your ultimate goal isn’t to write a book, or to hit 1000 members, or to lose twenty pounds. Your goal is personal growth, and because you grow, you accomplish those things in time.

**Aftershock #3: We moved from Industry to Individuals.**

By *industry* here, I mean the bureaucracy or the system. I see a major shift having taken place here, in which we’ve moved from loyalty to a set of confines toward creating space for individual expressions of creativity, growth, and ideas. We’ve changed from focusing on how it has always been done to thinking about how systems affect people. We’ve gone from “keep the power in the hands of a few” to “put power back into the hands of people.” When I started out in ministry, the biggest thing congregants wanted the pastor to do was to be a great preacher. Now they’re saying, “Can you equip the saints? Can you empower? Can you mobilize the laity?” It’s a whole new ball of wax now – and a much better one, with many people involved and lots of people taking ownership.

Denominations have often looked at ways to support their “industry” by keeping the denominational executives as the primary influencers – leadership from the top-down. The big issues for denominations were raising the money, paying the budgets, and furthering the “brand” whereas now they often allow much more freedom of expression in planting churches and being effective in the community. As a result, the influencers today are not necessarily the denominational executives; the influencers today are more often pastors in local churches who are in constant contact with the individuals in the church.

Elmer Towns wrote a book in 1970 called *It’s the Day of the Denomination Death*. I love the illustration in that book of the Dakota tribal wisdom which says that when you discover you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. We often try other strategies with dead
horses, including buying a stronger whip, changing riders, saying, “But this is the way we’ve always ridden this horse,” appointing a committee to study the horse, or changing the by-laws to specify that horses shall not die. My personal favorite is the idea of harnessing several dead horses together for increased speed. In the past, we’ve often left well enough alone, taking the approach of, “if it ain’t broke, why fix it?” With this shift from industry to individuals, however, there is much more of a focus on experimentation and seeing what works by trying different strategies and allowing the best ideas to arise out of many suggestions.

**Aftershock #4: We have gone from Scarcity to Abundance.**
When I started pastoring in 1969 in Hillham, every single board member remembered the Great Depression, so no matter what was good, they found something bad. If it could run, they could hunt it down, stop it, kill it, clean it, and preserve it. The Great Depression instilled a classic Scarcity mindset in many of its survivors: it’s the perception that there are a limited amount of resources to go around. This is in contrast to the Abundance perception, which contends that there are more than enough people and resources to go around.

The need to hoard, control, and exclude almost always accompanies this scarcity mindset. When I started out as a pastor, the goal wasn’t to reach new people; it was to hold the ones you got and not let them leave. Today, many pastors realize that no one has a corner on the “market” of believers. The goal now is not to hold people; it’s to reach people. If the church across the street has twenty percent more members than yours, then that’s terrific. There are plenty of unbelievers in your community, I assure you – reach them.

The scarcity mindset is the genesis of the idea that the pastor is the only one who can do the job, whereas abundance lays empowerment down where there are more than enough jobs to be done. Scarcity said that there may not be enough of whatever it is, so I better hoard it all up now, and abundance says that I want to share my time, resources, abilities, and energy with others. I used to look at pastors and think they were my competition, that I needed to surpass them; now I look back at it and laugh at myself. I realize now that the more I give away, the more I get back. You have to keep the flow moving out so you can get more stuff coming in. The more you pass on and help others, the more God will entrust you to give more stuff to pass on and help others.

If you’re the type of person who, when you get something good your first inclination is to hold on to it and keep it for yourself, I want you to know you’re shortchanging. You’re not only shortchanging yourself in your own growth and development, but you’re shortchanging your future. You’re never going to compound your effectiveness. Everything in my life that has compounded in my ministry is because I decided not to keep it for myself. And everything I have ever had that has shriveled in my ministry are things that I cherished and tried to hold on to.

**Aftershock #5: We’ve had a shift from Consumerism to Stewardship.**
Consumerism, to a certain extent, is a product of good times. When things are good, there’s a tendency for us to be wasteful; and when times are lean, we tend to be better stewards of resources. However, under Consumerism in the past, we’ve consumed resources without regard to any negative repercussions, whereas under Stewardship we utilize resources with self-control, staying mindful of the consequences.

The church formerly used time and resources to entertain people, seeing them as consumers, whereas now we use time and resources to create environments and spiritual experiences. We involve churchgoers in lay ministry so as to give them ownership and belonging. There used to be one service, in one building, once a week. Now, not only our programs but even our buildings are multi-purposeful: the question is just how many ways can we use them? Is this going to be a one
time, once a week deal, or will it be a practical building that can we use every day, doing some kind of ministry for some kind of people to touch lives? Can we offer our building for civic or educational uses? Can it serve as a food bank or a temporary shelter? What needs does our community have that can be met by our church, both as a building and as an entity?

Stewardship is about management, not ownership. We have to understand that we’re here to manage the resources that God has given us. We don’t own anything. It is an eye-opening experience to realize that stewardship isn’t ten percent; stewardship is one hundred percent. The only reason we have a problem with the ten percent is when we think of it as our money. When you think it’s your money, you think, “I’m going to have to give up ten percent.” But the moment you realize it’s God’s money, you say, “I get to keep ninety percent!”

For me, many of these shifts took me far out of my comfort zone. If this article has made you a little bit uncomfortable and you felt a little bit uneasy with it, I want you to know that’s very natural, because a lot of times change leaves us with a melancholy sense of “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to keep up.” But here’s what I want you to know – the church and the leader that understands the times and instead of berating the times asks this question: “How can I be effective in these times?” That’s the leader who is going to be successful.

**Dr. John Maxwell** is an internationally recognized leadership expert, speaker and author who has sold over 16 million books. His organizations have trained more than two million leaders worldwide. Dr. Maxwell is the founder of INJOY Stewardship Services and the Catalyst pastors’ conference. Every year he speaks to Fortune 500 companies, international government leaders, and organizations as diverse as the United States Military Academy at West Point and the National Football League. A New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Business Week best-selling author, Dr. Maxwell was one of 25 authors and artists named to Amazon.com's 10th Anniversary Hall of Fame. Three of his books, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Developing the Leader Within You*, and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* have each sold over a million copies. His most recent book, *Leadership Gold*, summarizes the lessons he’s learned from a lifetime of leading.