

Sweet tells Truett conference God is 'defragging and rebooting' church

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By Hannah Elliott

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WACO (ABP)—Deal with it, get over it or get help. That's Leonard Sweet's mantra when it comes to understanding Christianity's fluid role in the postmodern world.

The Christian church is in the midst of a "perfect storm," Sweet told a crowd at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. Such stormy weather is manifested in, among other things, postmodernism —the worldview that questions modern assumptions about certainty and progress. Modernism gave Christians a preferred status as "chaplain" to the culture. But Christians in the West no longer can expect to have that "home-court advantage," he said.

Leonard Sweet
(Photo courtesy of
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What's more, the church can't change the fact that culture has rejected traditional institutions, he added. So, it must change from the inside out.

And it does no good to complain about it.

"God is defragging and rebooting the church," Sweet said, alluding to computer terminology for reconfiguring and restarting a system. "What he is doing is he is getting us back to the original operating system of Christianity."

Sweet's address came as part of the seminary's fifth annual conference for pastors and laymen. He is a professor of evangelism in the theological school at Drew University in Madison, N.J., and is a visiting professor at George Fox University in Portland, Ore. His latest book, *The Gospel According to Starbucks*, uses the coffee giant to illustrate postmodern people's shift toward an experiential, image-laden and communal way of viewing the world.

The old model of church is "killing the West," Sweet said at the conference. The out-dated model is "attractional, propositional and colonial." It must become missional, relational and incarnational, he said.

"This culture understands that everybody knows they've been created for a mission," Sweet said. "It's not a mission project. Do you hear the difference? (Throughout) your whole life, you're in it. It's a pilgrimage. It's a journey."

According to Sweet, the Roman governor Pilate was the first postmodernist because he asked Jesus a "fundamental postmodernist" question: "What is truth?"

All of Christianity hinges on the answer, he suggested.

“Truth is Jesus,” Sweet said. “This is the uniqueness of Christianity in all of the religions of the world. Every other religion defines truth in propositional terms.”

All other prophets and spiritual leaders told adherents to follow their teachings to find the way to enlightenment, Sweet said, but Jesus was the “only one who had the chutzpah to announce to the whole world, ‘I am the way.’ Truth is a relationship.”

The ability to help people recognize the difference between propositional teachings and relational truth will come from a different mindset for teaching, preaching and living, Sweet said.

When he attended seminary, he learned that “preaching is making the Scriptures come alive.” Now, he has come to believe the complete opposite—Christians must come alive to the Scriptures.

“I’m not 360 degrees from there (his time at seminary), I’m at 180 degrees. The complete opposite,” he said. “The problem is not with the (Bible); the problem is with us.”