

# Not Ashamed of the Gospel in a Postmodern Age

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An advertising agent in New York noticed a blind man with a sign that read “I am blind.” The little box under the sign contained only a few paltry coins. Rather than place money in the box, the advertiser decided to use his marketing skills to make the man a new sign that read “It is spring and I am blind.” Quickly the little box began to fill with money. What made the difference? One sign provided information, the other information *with feelings*.

We hang out our signs that invite people to come to worship. We even have slogans that read, “A Bible teaching church with historical worship.” There are only a few takers these days. Most are driving past our church. They want to check out the local praise service in the high school gymnasium. It’s the church with the catchy ads, “Remember when church was *booooring*? Times have changed!” They want the worship where the presence of God can be felt and experienced.

Where are the young families in our churches? Why aren’t the nurseries crowded with little ones? Why are there so many gray heads in the pews, and so few parents with babes in arms? Could it be that our style of worship and our message is viewed as devoid of feeling and relevance to those who are steeped in the current movement we call postmodernism? Could it be that the craving of the sinful nature for an immediate working of the Holy Spirit is being successfully met by those who are skillful in “practicing the presence of God?”

All evangelism is done in context. Jesus was tuned into the people of his times and their needs. He created a bridge to a woman at the well in Samaria. He went into the villages healing people and sharing the good news of the kingdom. Paul adjusted his approach to reach out to the people of Athens. He became all things to all people, but never changed the message of salvation whatever the cultural context was. I believe it is helpful for us to know the culture that washes around us as we boldly proclaim the gospel. I also believe that we can use this knowledge to seize the moment for building bridges towards people without selling out the gospel message or the valuable tradition of worship that has blessed our church for many generations. If a person spends any length of time in a foreign country, we would expect him to learn the language and the culture of the country in which he is living. The Christians of a new millennium need to know the thought forms of the people to whom they speak.

Let’s be realistic, dear brothers. If we view the landscape around us as Dorothy did in *The Wizard of Oz* we will draw the conclusion we are no longer in Kansas. We can bury our head in the sand and refuse to look at the change, or we can recognize the cultural shift that has taken place. It may be hard to pinpoint exactly how this all happened, just as it is hard to know exactly when we first began to read.

In this conference essay we want to look at the new world that surrounds us by delving into this movement we call “postmodernism.” By the end of the paper I hope to accomplish the following:

- Develop the contrast between modernism and postmodernism.
- Examine the postmodern influence on Christian worship.
- Present a theory that postmodernism thinking is similar to first century gnosticism.
- Offer a ringing endorsement to the power of the gospel and the Word that lasts forever.

## Postmodernism Defies Definition

Postmodern thought by its very nature defies logic and reason. It refuses to be categorized and placed into a neatly defined system. When asked at a conference to present a definition of deconstruction, one leading postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida showed visible disdain for the person asking the question. He resented

being challenged to distil his thinking process into a simple, understandable epistemological statement. The postmodernist has little patience for those still operating under the paradigm of modernism.

Dr. Al Barry, president of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod offers this simple definition:

Postmodernism is a cultural force and societal trend that leads many people to believe that there is no objective truth, no sure and certain right and wrong, no way of ever being sure about anything, other than what brings personal pleasure and appeals to one's personal interests and tastes.<sup>1</sup>

To help us understand the new world that is around us, we might go back in time to another major paradigm shift that occurred at the time of the tower of Babel. Those ancient people united together with the common goal, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." This was humanism at its best.

During the past 400 years another tower has been built. Mankind pursued building a brave new world based on human accomplishment. This tower of modernism now stands in ruins. The individual tribes are looking at the ruins, shrugging their shoulders, and walking away. Western thought had its shot at creating a better world. Now it is up to the tribes and individuals to make the best of a shattered world. "Let's all just try to get along" said a tearful Rodney King after the tribal warfare in LA a few years ago. No lofty goals to usher in a new world, just trying to get along.

In *Star Trek* the conquering hero, a rugged individual, is Captain James Kirk. He goes from planet to planet righting wrongs and making the universe safe for democracy. This mission was to explore new worlds, to seek out new civilizations and to bring them into the federation. Spock is half human and half vulcan, always suppressing human emotions. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the aim is to learn from other cultures and not try to assimilate them.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis is on the team, not the rugged individual, and the machine like Data is seeking to open himself up to emotions and feelings. The shift in world view that has occurred in *Star Trek* serves as a paradigm for the shift that has taken place from modernism to postmodernism.

## Modernism

Some historians place the birth of the modern era at the dawn of the Enlightenment, which followed the Thirty Years War.<sup>3</sup> Rene Descartes laid the foundation for the tower of modernism with his focus on doubt. His dictum, "I am thinking therefore I am," led him to conclude that the evidence for the thinking self is the starting place for the pursuit of truth. There was no confidence in a pure revelation that comes from God. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this rationalism undermined Biblical Christianity in most European nations. Goddess Reason was enthroned at the cathedral Notre Dame after the storming of the Bastille in 1789. Man became the "measure of all things."

The age of Enlightenment gave way to the age of Romanticism in the nineteenth century. Romantic thinkers constructed a more open view of God that allowed God to exist safely alongside of reason. This new Deism offered a religion that celebrated "virtues" without clear, solid, biblical truth. The God who reveals himself in nature was preferred to the God who speaks in his Word. With such a reduced, generic view of God there was room for everyone at Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond.

In theology, a new hermeneutic or method of interpreting Scripture emerged. Scholars led the way in cutting out the "myths" embedded in Scripture and reducing the gospel to a more basic, acceptable message. Rationalist theology stepped into the secular limelight in the 1960's with the bold pronouncement that "god is dead." In science there was the endless search for the origin of life and for proof that man is a chance

<sup>1</sup> Al Barry, "Issues Impacting the Synod: Postmodernism," LC-MS Synod President's Website.

<sup>2</sup> *Generation X Papers*, Internet.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 2.

configuration of atoms in the slipstream of the universe. The rapid progress in technology and industry led to a heady optimism that we could change the world and enter a new Promised Land based on human accomplishments.

I grew up in the 1950's and 60's. We lived on the tower of modernism and watched it being built around us. We stood in awe of science and technology. The bright minds that gave us aluminum, TV dinners, and rockets heading for the moon were the wonder kids who we hoped would engineer a new world of peace and prosperity. We dreamed of a place where families did not have to build bomb shelters, where there would be a chicken in every pot, and a car in every garage. Yes, we even spoke of Camelot. We heard a president say, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." We watched in amazement as an astronaut took his first steps on the moon. Man proudly taunted his intelligence with the words, "one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind." Man was on top, God was at the bottom, a product of the mind of man.

Then things started falling apart on the proudly built tower of modernism. The 60's were times of turbulence and questioning. The film *The Graduate* spared no punches as it struck out at a plastic world, moral standards, the family unit, and the institution of the church. The narcissistic young minds of this era read books such as *The Greening of America* and *The Making of a Counter Culture*. My generation sincerely believed it was better equipped to engineer a new world based on peace and harmony, rather than advances in technology. The euphoria of Haight Ashbury, Wood Stock and the dawning of the age of Aquarius gave way to disillusionment with a system that could not end the senseless killing in Vietnam. We sang about this futility and frustration with such songs as *Blowing in the Wind*.

The Christian church rose up to meet the modernist challenges to the truthfulness of Scripture. We had the champions who held up the flag for Biblical truth during this era. A trip to the local Christian bookstore in the 70's meant perusing books from evangelicals who were bold to proclaim the truths of Scripture, the deity of Christ, and false teaching of those who espoused the higher critical method of Scripture. One of my classmates who toured Europe with me spent a week in L'Abri, Switzerland, visiting with the stalwart apologist Francis Shaffer. John Warwick Montgomery took on the "death of God" theologians and shredded them with arguments drawn from apologetics and Scripture. The LCMS Convention appointed a Fact Finding Committee to examine the teachers at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. The Missouri faithful rose up to challenge the ensconced, many-lettered academics with prestigious theological degrees. They dared to ask the defining question, "Do you believe Adam and Eve were real people?"

It was fun to confront people with the gospel and the claims of Scripture during the early 70's. I attended a missionary conference that encouraged us to go door to door, get our foot in the door, and then pop the question, "If you were to die tonight would you be sure of eternal life?" This style of "Rambo evangelism" was not very fruitful, but it was fun. The people in the 1970's always seemed ready for a good fight. It was fun to have them challenge you, and then have the reward of being able to challenge them with the claims of Scripture. There was even a book written, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. The fastest growing churches in the 60's and 70's were those willing to take a stand on the Bible and confront people with the propositional truths of Scripture. We read books on apologetics by Josh McDowell, and debated whether such use of apologetics was valuable in reaching the lost. We immersed ourselves in creation science to engage the evolutionist with the hope of having an opportunity to present the truths of salvation.

Twentieth century evangelicals have devoted much energy to the task of demonstrating the credibility of the Christian faith to a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science. Evangelical presentations of the gospel have often been accompanied by a rational apologetic that appeals to proofs for the existence of God, trustworthiness of the Bible and the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Evangelical systematic theologians have generally focused on the propositional content of the faith, seeking to provide a logical presentation of Christian doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

The times have changed. It is totally unacceptable to challenge another person and hurt their feelings. All discussion ends when the challenge is refuted with the words, “Says who?” Objective facts and truth make no sense to the relativist who believes that your claims for truth are merely “your truth.” Truth is not important. Personal feelings are. How do you present objective biblical truth to a person who says: “I believe in God. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It’s ‘Sheila-ism.’ Just my own little voice.”<sup>5</sup> Sheila’s credo is “I feel therefore I am.”

### Radical Relativism

The postmodern era offers a challenge to the Christian church because all truth is viewed as relative. The Christian who sets forth claims for Christ from Scripture will be brushed off with the discussion ending words, “that’s your story.” The postmodernist thinks to himself, “You have your story on the facts and I have my story. I will gladly listen to your story and you can listen to mine, but please don’t ever tell me my story may be wrong.”

Professor Jeffrey Russell described the radical relativism that pervades this postmodern age:

I first encountered radical relativism in a classroom in the early 70s, when I was showing pictures and photographs of violence. Among the pictures was one of a soldier kicking a little boy to death. One of the young women in the class argued strongly that we had no right to make a value judgment about the soldier’s act. After much time in discussion, she finally allowed that the soldier’s act might have been wrong—but NOT because the boy was suffering. Rather, her reason was that the soldier “might have enjoyed the boy’s company if he had got to know him.” She allowed that from the boy’s point of view things probably looked different. But the only judgment she would make on the soldier was on the basis of the pleasure he might have deprived himself of. There is no GOOD; there is only feeling good. The pleasure principle. Good and evil depend on how you happen to feel. Note the phrase “Happen to feel.”<sup>6</sup>

How did such relativism and radical relativism weave itself into the warp and woof of our society? Satan has chosen the timeless question, “Did God really say that you should not eat from the tree?” The human mind, corrupted by sin, forever questions whether God is real, whether he has spoken to us through the Bible, and whether we should take his Word seriously. During the Reformation, there was a return to believing that God was in the upper story and we were in the lower story. Martin Luther sought the truth in that upper story. He never wanted to see himself or anything human added to God-given truth in the upper level. The age of Enlightenment saw human elements in that second level, which could be discerned and dissected with the human mind. Eventually God was thrown out of the upper story completely, and declared to be dead in the book, *The Death of God*. In the postmodern era, even Dame Reason herself is violently thrown out the window from the upper level. She is replaced with a softer, far more alluring mistress, Madam Feelings.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell, Homily at Unitarian Church, Santa Barbara, in 1995. Russell adds, “A few years later, at UCSB, while teaching philosophy of history I encountered another variety of radical relativism. I tried in vain to get the class to admit that the Sistine Chapel was better than a stick figure I scrawled on the board, that a Bach cantata was better than my toneless humming, that King Lear was better than Roses are Red, Violets are blue. No way. Some people, they replied, might prefer the stick figure or the greeting card sentiments. One young woman in the class was particularly bright and later went on to a successful career as a lawyer. She was an oboe player in the Santa Barbara Symphony. She had been practicing oboe for seven or eight years. I had never done more than look at one. I challenged her to bring her oboe, and we’d see whether it was possible to determine whose playing was better. “Some people might prefer the way you played,” she responded. Then why practice at all, let alone seven years? At the end of the term, the young woman turned in the best paper in the class. I gave her an A, of course, and she was delighted. But what if I had taken her at her word? What if I had told her, “You are getting a C along with everyone else, because there is no basis on which to judge one paper better than another?”

## Deconstruction

The postmodern mind prefers to deconstruct truth, rather than search for truth and meaning. Instead of searching for meaning in a text or language, there is a desire to violently master the text and make it serve your own thought patterns. Gene Vieth writes,

For the deconstructionists, all truth claims are suspect and are treated as a cover-up for power plays...Today's universities, while ostensibly devoted to cultivating truth, now argue that truth does not exist. This does not mean that the universities are closing their doors. Rather, the universities are redefining what scholarship is all about.<sup>7</sup>

Deconstruction has its roots in the nihilism of the German philosopher Freidrick Nietzsche (1844-1900). He contended that we have no access to reality whatsoever. There is no true world. Everything is a "personal appearance." We live in a constructed world that comes from our own existence.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche used the analogy of a leaf and leaves. The difference between the concept "leaf" and particular "leaves" shows how we live in a constructed world of universals that loses sight of valuable particulars. Permit me to expand on this thought to explain this process of deconstruction.

If I am writing an article for a fall newsletter I may wish to decorate the article with a leaf or leaves. I can find a fall leaf in my file of clip art, or I can enter MS-Word's clipart file, or I can go on-line to pull off some leaves, or I can pull out a CD-ROM with thousands of images. While I am searching for a leaf I have a certain image or construct in my mind. It is probably a maple leaf similar to what I experienced on the family farm. This concept of a leaf may be very limited and not allow me to think of different forms of leaves such as banana leaves from Hawaii or mesquite leaves from Tucson. I am looking at leaves through certain filters that were established in my childhood, reinforced by fall leaves on the bulletin board in Lutheran elementary school and continually reinforced by the plastic leaves that someone places on the tables in our church during every Fall Harvest Festival.

The *a priori* assumption of postmodernism is that all my constructs that were framed and formed by the Western world into which I was born are suspect or even evil. The universal concept of a leaf that dominates my thinking could lead me to think of autumn, a harvest festival, a feast with Pilgrims and Indians, and a social construct where Pilgrims treat the Indians as pagans and lesser people. I must clear my mind of these constructs to appreciate what others are feeling, or what I may be feeling at the moment. "The postmodernist sins are "being judgmental," "being narrow-minded," "thinking you have the only truth" and "trying to enforce your values on anyone else."<sup>9</sup>

Michel Foucault followed in the footsteps of Nietzsche. After his death from AIDS in 1984 he was hailed as "the single most famous intellectual in the world." Foucault finds the discipline of history suspect to its very core. To present a continuous story, historians have dissolved the discontinuity and uniqueness of singular events and cloaked their works in the language of universals.<sup>10</sup>

According to Foucault, Western society has for three centuries made a number of fundamental errors. He argues that scholars have erroneously believed (1) that an objective body of knowledge exists and is waiting to be discovered, (2) that they actually possess such knowledge and that it is neutral or value-free, and (3) that the pursuit of knowledge benefits all humankind rather than just a specific class.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gene Edward Vieth, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, Grenz, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vieth, p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, Grenz, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, Grenz, p. 131.

This assault on universal truth is the centerpiece of postmodernism. Jacques Derrida, another French philosopher, claimed that words have no objective content. The whole world is seen as “text.” There is no reality except the reality that language creates in our minds. Derrida accused Western thought of “logocentrism”—that words mean things.<sup>12</sup> He accused Western thought of being divisive for using words with polar opposites such as good-evil, truth-error, positive-negative.

Are these philosophers only read by a handful of philosophy students living at the fringe of our society. Not according to Gene Vieth.

The new generation of college graduates has been immersed in this kind of thinking. Our new teachers, journalists, lawyers, judges, and political leaders have been indoctrinated. Many of them are coming out convinced there is no objective meaning and that truth is nothing more than an act of power.<sup>13</sup>

In the excellent video series “Grasping for the Wind,” John Whitehead says, “The ideas that have shaped our present world were first gradually developed in the minds of philosophers and later popularized through the works of artists and entertainers.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan, the father of media theorists, explained to a bewildered Barbara Walters that the discomfort associated with electronic media stems from the fact that it transports the people who use it. “On the telephone,” he said, “it is YOU who gets sent, not the message. That’s why the medium is the message. It’s because it sends you, not just what you are saying.”<sup>15</sup> How the message is sent and how it is received becomes more important than the message itself. Communication becomes more important than the truth communicated.

### Preserving the Metanarrative

Along with the attack on history and truth, there is a delegitimizing of the grand narratives that form our lives. We grew up with big stories such as Columbus discovering America, or Abraham Lincoln reading his books next to the fire in the log cabin. These big stories or “metanarratives” are now under attack as social constructs of Western thinking. Postmodern author Walter Truett-Anderson writes about the end and beginning of stories:

Throughout the twentieth century, as the modern era’s construction of reality collapsed and a new consciousness emerged, literature revealed what was happening. In fiction, poetry, literary criticism, and theater, people encountered not only new stories and ways of telling them, but also new ideas about the role of story in life, and new challenges to the belief in a clear boundary between fiction and reality.<sup>16</sup>

In place of suspect and unreliable grand narratives, the postmodern person prefers the local narrative or local story. What happens in your life becomes more important and reliable than the grand themes or myths that have been amassed from the lives of other people.

Let’s look at the popular movie *Forrest Gump* as an example of how a local narrative is viewed as more legitimate than a string of metanarratives. Forrest Gump had a story to tell while sitting on a bench waiting for a bus. As he tells the story of his life, we see a string of larger stories reflecting the history of our country. The

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<sup>12</sup> *Generation X Papers*, Internet.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vieth, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> John Whitehead, *Grasping for the Wind Study Guide*, (Gadfly Productions: Charlottesville, Virginia), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Graeme Codrington, “Generation X: Who, what, why, and where to?” (Web Page).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Truett-Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be*, (Harper San Francisco: Harper Collins), p. 99.

grand themes of football, the hippie movement, the war in Vietnam, or investing in Apple Computer, are portrayed as unreliable social constructs. What has worth and merit is the story of Forrest's life told in his inimitable style. There is value in the postmodern criticism of the failings of modernism. We can see that some of the grand stories of our history were the stories of people determined to suppress and hurt other people. Yet, we cannot go to the extreme view that casts out all metanarratives, including the Biblical account.

The Bible is a reliable and trustworthy metanarrative. It is not merely a product of Judeo-Christian culture, or a string of social constructs from the Western world. It is a book where God speaks to us through people in language we can understand and trust. "Holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). It is the grand account of God's plan to rescue people from eternal damnation through the blood of his Son shed on the cross for our sin.

Closely connected to this large account of God's plan for our lives, are a variety of sub accounts or local stories that can quickly engage the mind of the postmodern person who is always eager for another local story. Jesus often engaged people in local stories about birds, planting seed, and working in the vineyard. The attentive audience was then given the larger story of God's plan for their lives. He told Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." The Bible is a rich depository of narratives that we can share with people on a local level as we always bring into our teaching the larger picture of law and gospel. Within each verse of Scripture are individual words and thoughts that allow us to create a picture or thought that draws in people, gains their attention, and shares with them God's plan for their lives. If we are going to reach people in the next millennium then let's delve deeply into the texts of Scripture and bring out the treasures old and new. Preach and teach with words that are faithful to the God given text. Bring in the wider context of law and gospel wherever possible. When we pass on the message God has given to us in the Bible, the Holy Spirit will draw people into the big picture of life that God has planned for them.

Generation X people love stories.

Because they have abandoned metanarratives, they are forced to create narratives of their own to define meaning and to give expression to themselves. "Stories are intensely important to Generation X. We are not big on descriptions and adjectives. We want the feelings, the action, the story..."<sup>17</sup>

Fusing fiction and reality is a popular way to unfold the local story. With the computer it is possible to skillfully blend reality and virtual reality, to blend humans and dinosaurs in the film *Jurassic Park*. Is the new Jeep advertised on TV really on a pillar of some remote canyon in Utah, or is this computer imagery? It has been said that the medium has become the message. If truth is not real, then what keeps someone from telling a local story with a certain spin that will lead people to like them or even elect them to hold an office, or listen to a sermon? And God forbid that we ever blend reality and fiction by saying, "This week God really spoke to me when I studied these verses of Scripture that I want to share with you."

The quintessential goddess of postmodernism, Madonna, is a mistress at crafting her image.

She is always evolving; she never stands still. Every two years she comes up with a new look, a new way of presenting herself; a new attitude, a new act, and a new design. And every time it is successful. There is this constant genesis.<sup>18</sup>

This reflects our culture. We are always moving from one image to the next, one sound byte to another, flashing from commercial to commercial, rapidly processing information, but not pausing to think carefully.

As Paul Kelm quotes Richard Jensen in his paper, "Understanding and Addressing a Postmodern Culture," "Post-literate culture communicates in a sight/sound mosaic, a non-sequential collage of ideas

<sup>17</sup> Excerpt from Generation X website: "Generation X: Who, what, why and where to?" (Web Page).

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Katzenberg, Disney Studios (Website).

involving both hemispheres of the brain and addressing emotions as much as intellect.”<sup>19</sup> Generation X-ers want to quickly move from the facts of a story to focus their attention on how others feel about the story.

Share the local stories in Scripture. Unfold their dynamic truths that are laden with feelings and emotion. Then bring in the grand story of God’s plan of salvation. Avoid blending virtual reality (God spoke to me) with the truth of God’s Word. Don’t join the throngs of growing, “successful” churches that draw in large crowds with seeker services that have drama’s and talk show formats modeled after *Seinfeld* and *Oprah*. God’s Word is contemporary and it is timeless. It will reach every age. Jesus made it clear that “the gospel will be preached and then the end will come.”

### **Pluralism and Outreach Opportunities**

In the current cultural milieu where truth is a social construct, all religions are seen as having equal value and merit. The globalization of our world brings us into closer contact with people of other cultures and religions. With the wider contact comes a broader acceptance and tolerance. The person who says, “Well, that’s your truth,” will say, “Well, that’s your religion.”

For the first time in human history we have a truly global civilization. It is a civilization continually changing form, with unstable boundaries. People now see borders of all kinds as social constructs of reality and feel free to cross them, reconstruct them.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker that reads, “Think Globally Act Locally.”

Religious pluralism promotes the thinking that all religions offer their own respective paths back to God. This view is hostile to the claims of Jesus who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). The postmodern appreciates Jesus. He is their great teacher and enlightened spiritual master, but not true God, begotten of the Father, only Savior and way back to God. As Don Matzat was visiting with his sister in the hospital and sharing the word of God with her, a Jewish lady in the next bed said, “I just want you to know that I very much appreciate your Jesus. He was one of the great, enlightened spiritual masters. But tell me, why is it that you Christians claim that Jesus is the only way to the Father?” Matzat quoted from John 14:6 and she responded, “How do you know that he really said that? Somebody probably made that up.”<sup>21</sup> Making such exclusive claims for Jesus marks you as intolerant and arrogant. “A kinder image pictures religion as a mosaic or kaleidoscope in which a number of differing beliefs make up the entire pattern about the nature of God/Ultimate Reality.”<sup>22</sup>

Don Matzat alerts us to this shift to a kinder and gentler way of speaking in an essay he delivered to the LC-MS synod convention,

In the modern age, world religious and Christian denominations were in competition. The doctrinal claims of one group were set against the truth claims of competing groups... We shared the pure and refuted the errors of other groups, not to exert power over them, but because we were concerned about their eternal destiny. For us truth was a matter of life and death.<sup>23</sup>

Matzat then draws a comparison to postmodern advertising.

Modern advertising was of the same competitive nature. Chevy was better than Ford. Camels were smoother than Luckies. Pepsi tasted better than Coke. If you don’t believe try the Pepsi

<sup>19</sup> Paul Kelm, “Understanding and Addressing a Postmodern Culture,” Essay to WELS Board for Parish Services, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Truett-Anderson, “The Fontana Postmodern Reader,” p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Don Matzat, “Apologetics in a Postmodern Age,” Issues Web Site.

<sup>22</sup> Paul, Copan, *True For You, But Not For Me*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Matzat, “Evangelism in a Postmodern Age” (Essay delivered to 1997 LC-MS Convention).



taste test. But when Coke decided to “teach the world to sing” rather than compete with Pepsi, a whole new day of advertising dawned... You buy Bud because of frogs and lizards, not because it is better than Coors.<sup>24</sup>

In the United States of America we celebrate our unity in diversity. Our motto is *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one. We are a melting pot of different people, cultures and religions. Multiculturalism as its best recognizes this diversity and celebrates the different cultures that make up our society. At its worst, multiculturalism despises Western culture as the oppressor and controller of other cultures including the “culture” of homosexuality. Christianity and the exclusive claims for Jesus are viewed with a jaundiced eye as part of an evil empire that permeates our social constructs and needs to be excoriated. We are permitted to celebrate diversity only when being different makes no difference. My high school senior noted that students don’t want to offend anyone with their comments. The prevailing attitude is, “Don’t step on my shoes and I won’t step on yours.” The problem is, no one is wearing shoes.

We are different, yet we share a commonality with all people. The root of our sinful nature goes back to the fall as we sing in the hymn, “All mankind fell in Adam’s fall. One common sin infects us all.” We also share with all people the hope of salvation found in the glorious declaration of Romans 3, “(All) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.” This common heritage and common hope makes us bold to fearlessly proclaim that Jesus is the only hope of salvation for people of every culture. The postmodern person is no stranger to the local story of his personal struggle with sin, wickedness and shame. We have been left on this earth to lead people into their local story and then lead them into the grand story or metanarrative. This grand story reveals the fall into sin as the explanation for the shooting in Columbine High School, and the explanation for the angry feelings uncorked against someone in the family. There is a desperate need to share with people the deficiency of their righteousness and the horrors of eternal punishment, painted in vivid images set forth in the Scriptures. The Generation X-ers must hear about deliverance, not just deliverance from low self-esteem or the poor self-image that was engendered in a dysfunctional family. They need to hear the grand narrative of suffering that Jesus endured for all sin, and how the Father showed that he accepted the sacrifice by raising his Son to life again.

“Steve, I don’t hear enough preaching about the resurrection. I hear that Jesus suffered and died for my sin, but I don’t hear enough about the resurrection.” Those were the pleading words that came from one of my relatives whom I visited in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, while passing through to a mission board meeting in Milwaukee several years ago. These words keep going through my head, over and over again. “We don’t hear enough about the resurrection.” The resurrection is the supreme evidence that the Father accepted the sacrifice Jesus made for our sin. It is the kind of big picture or metanarrative, preaching, teaching and witnessing that we need to bring into every presentation of law and gospel. It is the message of the resurrection that galvanized the early church and propelled it to speak with boldness. Peter spoke the bold words, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to men by which we must be saved.”<sup>25</sup> These bold words were sandwiched between his testimony to the resurrection and the words of Psalm 118, a psalm that spoke of Jesus’ resurrection.

Will we be intimidated by the postmodern who challenges us with the words, “Well, that’s your story”? Yes, it can happen. I vividly recall a conversation I had with an elderly man, who had visited our worship service. It was about a year after I arrived there from the seminary to develop the new mission. He showed me his lovely garden. It was obvious by his speech that he was well educated. Suddenly, he looked me in the eye, and said, “You don’t believe that people who never heard about Jesus will be condemned to an eternity in hell, do you?” There was something about his conviction, the compassion in his voice, the caring, that took me by surprise and momentarily shook the foundation of my belief I was not able to give an adequate answer.

That night we had a Bible information class on the suffering and death of Jesus. In preparing for the class, I reread the section of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Father if it is possible let this cup

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Note the context of this verse. Peter is speaking of the resurrection and quoting from Psalm 118, the resurrection psalm.

pass from me, not my will, but Thine be done.” It seemed so clear and still does. If there were alternate paths for people to be saved then why would the Father ask his Son to drink the bitter cup? If there is hope in the mountains of Tibet, or the temple in Utah, or in a desert pilgrimage to Mecca, then why would the Father ask his Son to go forth, and why would Jesus endure the cross and shame with joy? Brothers, take the postmodern to the Garden and show him Jesus praying. The postmodern loves stories. God’s Word gives us the windows we can use to enter into their lives. Show them the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world as Martin Luther did in his sermon on John 1:29.<sup>26</sup>

### Current Trends in Worship

After looking briefly at the cultural shift that has taken place, we are prepared to look more carefully at the changes in worship that we have observed in the last decade. There has been a seismic, megashift in worship style among evangelical churches. The *Los Angeles Times Magazine* reported on one Lutheran church that distributes flyers advertising their church service as “God’s Country Goodtime Hour.” The flyers boldly promise “line dancing following worship.” The pastor joins in with the dancing. He credits the campaign with revitalizing his church.<sup>27</sup> John MacArthur comments on this trend to market the church with these words, “Clearly the corporate worship of the Lord’s Day is undergoing a revolution that has few parallels in all of church history.”<sup>28</sup> He further offers this bold denunciation of the contemporary church,

The contemporary church’s abandonment of *Sola Scriptura* as the regulative principle has opened the church to some of the grossest imaginable abuses—including honky-tonk church services, the carnival sideshow atmosphere, and wrestling exhibitions. Even the broadest, most liberal application of the regulative principle would have a corrective effect on such abuses.<sup>29</sup>

In 1995 even ABC reported on the megashift that was taking place in worship with an evening special called “In the Name of God.” One leading church growth pastor told Peter Jennings that the reason he did not have a cross anywhere was because, as important as the cross is to the church, Christianity cannot be reduced to one message or one symbol. Jennings asked the question whether these bold enterprises are actually making Christianity more relevant by abandoning the gospel.<sup>30</sup>

Don Matzat unveils the penchant of the church seeker entering a new millennium.

Postmodernists will attend a church that affords them the best experience—a church they will “like.” Whether or not the church teaches the truth makes little difference. A church made up of self-professed sinners in need of redemption, who week after week participate in the same ancient liturgy, sing hymns that primarily appeal to the intellect rather than to the emotions, and are led by a pastor who is concerned with pure doctrine stand little chance of appealing to this postmodern culture. On the other hand, a church offering a warm and safe, non-threatening environment with a friendly, relevant, open-minded pastor who leads an exciting Sunday morning contemporary experience and teaches biblical principles focusing upon marriage, the

<sup>26</sup> Luther on the Lamb of God: “It is extremely important that we know where our sins have been disposed of. The Law deposits them on our conscience and shoves them into our bosom. But God takes them from us and places them on the shoulders of the Lamb. If sin rested on me and on the world, we would be lost; for it is too strong and burdensome. God says: ‘I know that your sin is unbearable for you; therefore behold, I will lay it upon My Lamb and relieve you of it. Believe this! If you do, you are delivered of sin.’ There are only two abodes for sin: it either resides with you, weighing you down; or it lies on Christ, the Lamb of God. If it is loaded on your back, you are lost; but if it rests on Christ, you are free and saved. Now make your choice!” (*Luther’s Works*, Am. Ed., Vol. 22, p. 169).

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong, John, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, (Chicago: Moody Press 1996) p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245

family, values and morals will undoubtedly win. Adding fun-filled theme parks and colorful food courts to our facilities will also expand membership.<sup>31</sup>

“The church has always been tempted to locate the gospel in some place other than Christ and his gifts,” writes, Richard A. Krause in summer 1999 *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.<sup>32</sup> One of our members once gave us a bulletin from a WELS church they visited while traveling. The Old Testament Lesson for the day was the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32. The pastor’s message based on that lesson was, “The Golden Calf, an Attempt to Beef Up Religion.” It may not have been a theme that I would have chosen, but it captures the meaning of the text. There is inside each of us a desire to locate the gospel in some other place than Christ and his gifts. The sinful human nature always struggles to add something human to what God has already done for us in Christ. It hates singing the song of saints and angels, “Salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.” Any attempts to supplement the salvation we have in Christ, will ultimately supplant what we have been given.

A pastor from a nearby evangelical church defined worship as “practicing the presence of God.” This system of worship elevates how the worshipper feels about God above how God feels about the worshipper. Practicing the presence of God becomes a means of grace that replaces Word and Sacrament. In his book, *Marketing The Church*, George Barna advises,

This is what marketing the church is all about: providing our product [relationships] as a solution to people’s felt need...It is...critical that we keep in mind a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign...Our message has to be adapted to the needs of the audiences.

In our consumer driven society, people are being formed in the image and likeness of the marketable objects they desire. This is also true of the consumer driven church.

Our *Christian Worship Manual* defines worship as “receiving from God and responding to God.”<sup>33</sup> The WELS Web site on worship offers an essay by Professor Forrest Bivens that defines our worship in the unchanging article of justification, not the mercurial felt needs of people. He begins the essay with this quote from Luther.

The article of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our consciences before God. Without this article the world is utter darkness and death.<sup>34</sup>

He then closes the first part of the article with the words, “To summarize: The primary doctrine, justification, establishes personal and corporate worship among Christians. It is responsible, under God, for the primary setting.” He then applies this to the dangers in Protestant theology and worship.

Protestant theology has changed faith from an instrument apprehending God’s grace, into a good work for which man is responsible, whether it is a decision, an acceptance, or a feeling which man must produce and thus make himself worthy or acceptable to God.<sup>35</sup>

The postmodern church shopper needs to see our joy of worship centered in this article of justification. This joy will show itself in how we conduct our service, how we sing our hymns, and how we eagerly accept

<sup>31</sup> Matzat, “Evangelism in a Postmodern Age” (Essay delivered to 1997 LC-MS Convention).

<sup>32</sup> Richard Krause, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, “Worship Wars at the Dawn of a New Millennium,” Summer 1999, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Baumler, *Christian Worship Manual*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Bivens, Forrest, “The Primary Doctrine in Its Primary Setting: Objective Justification and Lutheran Worship,” WELS Website, “Worship.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

the blessings that come in Word and sacrament. “Be all that you are!” is our slogan as we conduct our lives of worship to the Lord in the article of justification. Warm and friendly welcomes will be given to all who gather around us in worship, for we live and breathe the declaration that we have been declared righteous. If the postmodern people see this in us, they will stop, look and listen to what we have to offer. Every effort needs to be made to develop loving relational bridges to Generation-Xers, as we invite them to join us in worship and Bible study that is defined by the article of justification.

### Postmodern Thinking and the Return to Gnosticism

Earlier I proposed to draw a comparison between postmodern religious thinking and ancient gnosticism. Both rely heavily on mystical experience as the key to a higher spiritual life. Both denigrate the person of Christ and what He has accomplished for our salvation. Dr. Siegbert Becker offered a chilling warning for the next generation. He predicted that my generation would battle for the Bible, but the next generation would battle for the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe that we are in that war as feelings about Christ and mystical experiences have replaced solid doctrinal teaching on the incarnation, person, atonement, resurrection and return of Christ.

Within every human heart there is an ache for Eden. The sinful nature leads us to believe that mystical and religious experiences can satisfy this craving and open up the door for greater closeness to God. The ancient gnostics believed that implanted in every human was the seed of God himself.<sup>36</sup> With proper religious instruction and mystical experiences one could open up and develop greater closeness to God. There was a desire to know God through feelings, mystical thoughts, voices, visions and dreams. With spiritual experiences, the presence of God could be felt. Remember the movie *ET*? With the right tools ET was able to establish contact with his own people in the farthest reaches of the universe. With the right knowledge or channeling skills, the gnostic could create a connection between the god within and the greater energy out there. John Leo comments on this megashift towards feelings in an article for *U.S. News and World Report* with the appropriate title, “May the Feel Be with You.” He writes about *Star Wars*,

In the original *Star Wars* movie, Obi-Wan Kenobi sternly tells Luke Skywalker, “Stretch out with your feelings,” “Let go your conscious self and act on instinct,” and finally, “Let go, Luke!” This last piece of advice comes when Skywalker is foolishly trying to destroy the evil Death Star by using a computer instead of his feelings to hit a target the size of a grapefruit while flying 300 miles per hour at an altitude of 20 feet.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gnosticism was an esoteric religious movement that flourished during the second and third century A.D. and presented a major challenge to orthodox Christianity. Most Gnostic sects professed Christianity but their beliefs sharply diverged from those of Christianity in the early Church. To its adherents, Gnosticism promised a secret knowledge of the divine realm. Sparks or seeds of the Divine Being fell from this transcendent realm into the material universe, which is wholly evil, and were imprisoned in human bodies. Re-awakened by knowledge, the divine element in humanity can return to its proper home in the transcendental spiritual realm. [Gnosticism, Funk & Wagnalls *New Encyclopedia*, Vol. 12, p.10]

The doctrinal core of Gnosticism is basically a form of mystical religious or philosophical doctrines which other adherents and some early Christian sects spread and which the early Church leaders vehemently rejected as heresy. Believers in Gnosticism are called Gnostics. The word “Gnostic” is derived from the greek word *gnostiko* or *gnosis* (inner mystic knowledge). The Gnostics believe that “gnosis” is subjective (internally perceived by the mind or feelings) knowledge of the divine element or spark in every man that needs to be discovered to be known. They believe the divine spark originally came from the “realm of light” (totally alienated from the world and the flesh), and is resident in the soul of man and is held there in captivity by the flesh (a product of demons). The only way to release the divine spark is through divine “revelation knowledge,” experienced within in the spirit. Also they believe that only when the unconscious spirit in man is awakened by revelation from the “realm of light” can he come to know his real self—the god within. Explained in a nutshell: *God is within, waiting to be revealed. Any external influence (matter) is evil. Finding the god within comes only via your mind or feelings. There are no external checks or balances, only those which your inner spirit appropriates as you progress in your revelation.*

<sup>37</sup> Leo, John, *U.S. News and World Report*, “May the Feel Be With You,” June 28, 1999.

Postmodern religion has a striking similarity to ancient gnostic thought and *Star Wars*.

Postmodern religion in all its forms is marked by a placing of self and experience at the center. Once self occupies the center, a whole new world opens up. In New Age thought, we are our gods able to create our own reality. How similar this is to the secular notion of “constructionism,” where people construct knowledge or reality from within themselves or their belief community...

We can characterize postmodern spirituality as a flight from the pursuit of historical and propositional truth to a preoccupation with mystical experiences.<sup>38</sup>

Consumer driven churches have sold their birthright, making it their business to appeal to the postmodern feelings rather than the mind. They use advertising campaigns that criticize the way church used to be. One card shows a girl leaping in the air with the caption, “Life was never meant to be boring.” Inside are the words,

Neither was church.

Hard pews, droning music, monotone sermons, forget it! God is the author of life—REAL life! At (church name), we celebrate life and you’ll see it in our services. You’ll find upbeat music, positive messages and friendly people. There’s something for everyone. Come change your ideas about church; tell boredom to take a flying leap.<sup>39</sup>

The incipient gnostics in the church today send out their messages via the air waves and offer their insights into God that exceed that of the written Word of God. They seem to know more as they boldly say, “God really spoke to me when I was visiting this portion of Scripture this past week.” Last October, I drove to our conference in Citrus Heights. While driving I had the opportunity to listen to Christian radio stations in the Central Valley. I was appalled at how often I heard hosts and preachers say, “God spoke to me.” What comes across the airwaves eventually finds its way into the kitchen. This summer I attended an outdoor wedding where the father of the bride was quick to tell the large crowd gathered around the lawn near the pool, that he knew it would be a sunny day instead of foggy. He shared how the Lord told him early that morning, “Fred put on the sun screen.” Bible study groups meet around the Scriptures in living room conventicles with lesson books that encourage people to share their feelings about a particular verse. The truth of the Word itself and the great doctrines of our Lord Jesus Christ are pushed onto back burner.

The drift in evangelicalism towards the subjective makes people especially vulnerable to postmodern and gnostic thinking. Michael Horton offers this insight on the inward turn that occurred in Pietism.

Pietism, a reaction against Reformation orthodoxy, represented a turn inward, from God to self. Instead of focusing on God and his saving work in Christ, it shifted the focus to me and my personal relationship with Jesus. While no cardinal evangelical truth was rejected, the objective focus on Christ’s justification of the sinner was subverted by the subjective focus on the experience of the believer. Once Arminianism arrived on the scene, followed by revivalism, this subjective orientation was intensified and God was no longer the sovereign Redeemer who saved sinners by his own will and effort, but was now the one who waited for the sinner to act. This is why the purpose of worship now was not to provide the context in which God addressed his people and saved them by preaching and sacrament, but to provide an opportunity for the unconverted to express their commitment and determination to live a holy life. God was pushed into the background.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> McCallum, Dennis, “The Death of Truth,” p. 209, 211.

<sup>39</sup> “The Church Outreach Tools You Have Been Waiting For,” *Outreach Marketing*, Oceanside, California.

<sup>40</sup> Horton, “Leading the Christian Church into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

Nadab and Abthu were killed by God in the desert for offering “strange fire to the Lord.” The sinful nature always wants to tamper with God’s plan of salvation, especially with the strange blend of saving faith in Christ and subjective experience.

Harold Senkbeil dared to expose this weakness in evangelical teaching in his book *Sanctification—Christ in Action*. Particularly alarming is his unveiling of the popular Christian author and speaker, Chuck Swindoll. Swindoll’s often read books offer insights into Christian living, but they fail to placard the big picture of the cross, the tomb, the law and the gospel, and uniqueness of Christ. The local stories of Christians and Chuck’s personal life are told in a winsome way, but the larger metanarratives of the death, resurrection and triumph of the Lord over sin are seldom brought into each vignette. The turn inward is what people want, rather than the turn upward to transcendence and to the glory of God in the cross and open tomb.

There was a time when doctrine could be discussed openly and freely among Christians with opposing views on Baptism, Lord’s Supper, the return of Christ, and the bondage of the will. The times have changed. We are now in a zone where doctrine is judged by feeling similar to the way the Mormons determine truth with a “burning in the bosom.” Gene Vieth writes of this shift when he says, “The old paradigm taught that if you have the right teaching you will experience God. The new paradigm says that if you experience God, you will have the right teaching.”<sup>41</sup> Not only is objective doctrine minimized in favor of subjective experience, experience actually becomes the criterion for judging doctrine. Ultimately our Lord and Savior is denigrated in favor of experience.

The Apostle Paul certainly had his concerns about this new way of thinking that sought to blend subjective human experience with the saving work of Christ. Epaphras traveled the 1300 miles to Rome from Colosse seeking help with the problem that was arising in the new group of Christians he was shepherding. Paul wrote to the Colossians Christians pleading with them to seek a higher knowledge in Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” He warns against those who are trying to deceive them with “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basis principles of this world rather than on Christ.” He encouraged the Christians who were being led inward to “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”<sup>42</sup> In Romans 10 we are told, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming.”

Permit an example of postmodern preaching and teaching that takes our eyes off of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. I was checking out websites on Calvary Chapel churches in Hawaii, to see whether these evangelical churches were as active there as they are in California. One website for the island of Kauai was especially attractive. The pastor’s sermon for the previous Sunday was based on the feeding of the 5000 with the theme, “How a Little Boy Shared His Lunch.” I can understand how a pastor trained under the modernist system of theology favors this theme because he believes that Jesus never performed this miracle. He views this as an embellished story added to the Word of God by early Christians. Calvary Chapel pastors claim a solid allegiance to every word of Scripture. At the same time emotions and subjective feelings become vital in worship, teaching and group Bible studies. A pastor under the sway of postmodern thinking could prefer such a theme, because it focuses more on things of the heart. In both cases, the great doctrines of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished for us are either ignored or pushed to the back burner.

As I read Martin Luther during this age of the ‘90’s, I am even more impressed with how he exalts Christ on every occasion. I cannot go through a Christmas season without picking up his sermons on the gospel of John and reading his words about Christ in John 1:14.

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<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vieth, p. 211.

<sup>42</sup> Note that this is a reference to focusing our hope of salvation on Christ at the right hand of God where our lives are already hidden in Christ. The comfort in this verse is developed richly by Don Matzat in his book, *Christ Esteem*.

Thus this most precious treasure and the strongest consolation we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that He became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into greater glory, that our flesh and blood, skin and hair, hands and feet, stomach and back might reside in heaven as God does, and in order that we might boldly defy the devil and whatever else assails us. We are convinced that all our members belong in heaven as heirs of heaven's realm.<sup>43</sup>

### **A Ringing Endorsement for the Power of the Gospel**

It makes no difference what age we are living in, the power of the gospel remains the same. Jesus promised that the gospel would be preached until the end of time. He gave the charge to his disciples to witness to him to the "ends of the earth." Paul said "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation of everyone that believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Whether Jew or Greek, modern or postmodern, the gospel has its own internal power to reach the lost.

Jesus watched the people coming to him and had compassion on the crowd. He saw them "as sheep without a shepherd." The prophet Ezekiel opens our eyes to see people in a similar way, "My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them" (Ezekiel 34:6).

As we enter into the new millennium is it possible that we will find more people coming to us who are worn and weary from the excessive subjectivism of the 90's? As the baby boomers lose their grip on the Christian community will people want more in worship than simple repetitive worship and praise songs that reflect the genre of music in the sixties? Something has to fill the vacuum after excessive emotionalism has emptied the hearts of people. Ravi Zacharias sounds a startling alarm when he shares his fear that this emptiness might be filled in America with a more structured religion like Islam? Will the Muslim reach the scattered sheep before we do? Our structure in worship, our structure in classes, and our requirements for membership may seem out of tune to the baby boomer, but what about Generation-X and its search for transcendence? Gene Vieth quotes the song "Opener" by the Lutheran group *Lost and Found*. These words reflect a craving for substance and transcendence:

I am looking for something stronger - Than my own life these days.  
 Yet the church of my childhood - Seems like the YMCA.  
 Well, every Sunday - Is just like the last,  
 As if church has no history - And the people have no past.  
 We just sing what we like to sing - And we preach about the news,  
 And think of some new thing - Just to fill up the pews.  
 I want palms on Palm Sunday - And Pentecost to be red.  
 I want to drink the Wine - And eat of the Bread.  
 And they search for attendance - While I starve for transcendence.  
 But I count among this Body - Of the living and the dead.<sup>44</sup>

The opportunity that presents itself for the WELS to go "Forward in Christ" in this next millennium could be larger than we ever anticipated. I share the infectious optimism of Stephen Valleskey who wrote,

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<sup>43</sup> *Luther's Works*, Am. Ed., Volume 22, p. 110. For another example of how to preach Christ and the gospel read his sermon on the John 1:18 with the words, "Christ alone must be the means. He alone makes us paupers rich with His superabundance, expunges our sins with His righteousness, devours our death with His life, and transforms us from children of wrath, tainted with sin, hypocrisy, lies, and deceit, into children of grace and truth. Whoever does not possess this Man possesses nothing."

<sup>44</sup> Vieth, Gene, "Through All Generations" essay on [www.issuesetc.org](http://www.issuesetc.org).

Let this writer say that I for one enjoy immensely the ministry of the gospel in a postmodern world. In a pluralistic culture, where every viewpoint and shade of opinion is given equal hearing and status, there is of course the downside of the tragic loss to the faith of our young people (and sometimes mature members) in a marketplace of opinions with which they cannot cope. But if the choice were given between ministering with the gospel in the more fixed world I knew in the early days of my ministry when the lines were clearly drawn, and children tended to follow their parents in the faith by convention if not by conviction, I'll take the free marketplace of ideas anytime and the access to people with the gospel that presents to us. I can't remember when I last sat down to speak with anyone who said to me something like this, "I'm sorry, we are Catholic and not interested in what you have to say."<sup>45</sup>

My experience in researching and writing on this subject has led me to the conviction that it is important to seek out and pray for opportunities to engage postmodern people in a local story. We engage in the local story by prayerfully listening to their story, telling our story and leading up to lessons or stories God has revealed in his Word. Pastor Anthony Schultz and Professor John Jeske are masters at developing a local story from Scripture or a person's life and then leading the listener into deeper truths of God's Word.

Dr. Dale Meyer begins a recent Lutheran Hour sermon with these words,

There was a time when stories were a no-no with some ministers. Give people the Word of God, the logic went, not human stories. There was a time, when that was common thought. There also was a time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. There was a time when there were no TVs or computers. The fact is that in this day and age stories work. They work because we're looking for authentic experiences. We've become cynical about pitches, whether there pitches in a TV commercial or pitches from the minister. Real stories from real people communicate to us, living our real lives.<sup>46</sup>

Even better than any current models, we have the example of our Lord Jesus. He used the local story to create interest and led people to deeper truths. Classes need to be taught, and sermons need to be preached which develop the text, bring out a point of doctrine, or show the meaning of a word in such a way that people say, "I want to listen to that story." I believe there is a place for personal stories, but they must always take a back burner to biblical stories, and they must always serve the purpose of bringing in Christ.

Our loving heavenly Father will bless us as we pray for opportunities to proclaim the gospel of his Son within our current generation. The early church was devoted to prayer. As a prisoner in Rome, Paul requested of the Colossians, "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:2-3). In Mark 3:9 the Greek word translated "devote" is used to describe the disciples waiting on the shore to take Jesus across the sea of Galilee. We are walking on the shore, and patiently waiting for Jesus to come to us. We want him to help us, answer our prayers and open up doors of opportunity to reach this generation with the gospel. We are not ashamed of the gospel. It has not lost its power to reach people of every generation. As the sun is setting in the west and on the west, a promise lingers, and it won't go away, "'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Matthew 28:20).

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<sup>45</sup> Valleskey, Stephen, "The Impact of Postmodernism on Our Ministry and Its Antidote," p. 16.

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