

# Meeting the Needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Family Raising Spiritually Mature Adults in a Postmodern World (a background paper to supplement group discussion on ministering with and to our families)

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*“What has been will be again,  
what has been done will be done again;  
there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)*

Those words are a powerful reminder of how changeless human existence is in its essence. A person composing a work of literature staring into a phosphorescent screen or pushing a stylus across a clay tablet is still the same sinful human being moved by the same inner passions. A family housed in a sprawling mansion with air conditioning and in-ground pool and a family of nomads pitching their tent from place to place still struggle with the same tensions of living sinner with sinner as did Adam and Eve running and hiding and blaming each other in the Garden of Eden. And thank God that the troubled conscience of the soon to be 21<sup>st</sup> century sinner finds the same hope as those new sinners in the Garden. It is still the same offspring of the woman in which we all find peace and hope. Indeed, **“there is nothing new under the sun.”**

But we are misusing and abusing that passage if we hide behind those words of Solomon to keep us from closely examining the spirit of the times, the modern culture in which we live. It is certainly true that **“there is nothing new under the sun.”** However, in every age Satan is at work to brew a unique mix of old lies into intoxicating deceptions that threaten individual faith and hinder outward growth of God's kingdom. We need to be thoroughly aware of these same old lies in daring new dress. To fail to be on top of what Satan is doing in any age is to risk eternal harm to the souls in our care. However, being discerning about the culture allows us to offer timely and perceptive proclamations of **“This is what the LORD says”** from the timeless truths of God's Word.

As those entrusted by God with the eternal welfare of souls, let's spend some time today analyzing and organizing what we know about the modern culture swirling around us. Let's work together to be better prepared to attack the same old lies with new zeal. In particular, let's pay attention to the pressures the culture puts on the task of raising spiritually mature adults in our Christian homes, churches and schools. As we talk about meeting the ministry needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century family, we will meet a fearful challenge, but armed with the promises of God and the sword of the Spirit, we need not be afraid. The weapons God has given us to wield still have **“divine power to demolish strongholds. [Therefore] we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).** With that confidence, let's

view the challenges of the changing culture around us, and with Spiritual wisdom prepare ourselves to minister to the next generation of God's people.

### **I. Discerning the Times**

In the country in which we live, we appear to be at a crossroads. One human philosophy is beginning to fade while another appears poised to take its place. While only God knows what exact directions Satan's old lies re-dressed will take in the days ahead, it is still prudent for us to analyze the spirit of the times in which we live. As Gene Edward Veith Jr. reminds us in his book, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, "The church has always had to confront its culture and to exist in tension with the world. To ignore the culture is to risk irrelevance; to accept the culture uncritically is to risk syncretism and unfaithfulness." (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994, page xii)

Many students of the "Zeitgeist" insist that our culture is rapidly moving away from "modernism" toward a way of thinking now called "postmodernism." Let's begin by defining what the old order was before we move to the new. Modernism was the illegitimate child born to the unholy marriage of anti-supernatural rationalism and proud humanism. Modernism was the belief that man's unlimited gift of reason applied to the scientific method would continue to unlock more and more of the secrets of the universe. This application of reason with sound scientific methodology would enable mankind to solve the world's problems. Advances in medicine and other sciences would ease human suffering and make the tasks of life more manageable. Better and better educational opportunities would free man from his problems and prejudices. To this optimistic view of life filled with itself and brimming with confidence, it appeared that soon nothing would be impossible.

The comparisons to Babel are striking. The common language was science wed to humanistic pride and reason. The party line proclaimed that given the right opportunities and the proper education, there was no limit to the advancements that could be made for mankind against every obstacle. The "tower" of the modern world they were building would be impressive. "Modernism placed man at the center of reality, with confidence in the scientific method's ability to express that truth in universal propositions. To the modern world, knowledge was certain, objective, good and accessible to the human mind. There was unflinching trust in reason and an unquestioning optimism about the progress inevitable through science and education." (Paul Kelm, "Understanding and Addressing a Postmodern Culture," an essay delivered to the 1999 convention of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, page 4)

Of course, with man in the center, God was just as forgotten in Modernism as he was at Babel. The same anti-supernaturalism that had led Darwin to his conclusions of the origins of the universe, was applied to things spiritual. The world was a closed system in which only that which was observable and verifiable by the scientific method mattered. By default, God was not on that list. The same laws of reason that were applied to everything else were applied to the Bible. Under the microscope of unenlightened reason, the Bible came up empty.

But more and more that bubble of optimistic rational humanism has been burst by the reality of continuing and increasing troubles for mankind. Advances in technology that were to improve the human condition could just as easily be used for inflicting untold human suffering in armed

global conflicts or civil wars. Every war to end all wars planted the seeds of simmering hostility from which sprang the next war. No matter how technologically advanced man became, mankind seemed to be just as capable of perpetuating lovelessness, violence, hatred, and prejudice. Confidence in the abilities of reason and science to forge a better world were shaken. The old certainties of modernism with its confidence in man and his technology to conquer the troubles of life has been repeatedly undermined by global and societal troubles that persist or worsen. The anti-supernatural atheistic-leaning view of the world as nothing but material, as if only what was visible mattered or existed, has proved itself to be sterile and unfulfilling.

Certainly, despite that bleak accounting of modernism's shortcomings, there are still many whose confidence in human reason still has not ebbed. Just as it is also true that there have always been many Christians who never bought into the proud lies of rationalistic humanism with its erasure of God and deification of man. However, many who have grown disheartened with the tenets of modernism have turned their attention from one deception of Satan to a "new" one.

In the place of modernism's optimism in human potential, a new way of thinking has been gaining a foothold. It had its origins in the field of literary criticism in university classrooms, but especially through the ever present electronic media, and now the instant communication of the internet, it has begun more and more to infiltrate the thinking of the popular culture. This "new" way of thinking has been dubbed "postmodernism."

What is postmodernism? It is hard to describe in any detail since those who are its "leaders" seem to delight in speaking in vague and confusing jargon. In fact, at times it is their stated purpose to confuse and bewilder. As we will see in a moment, they want people to despair of every being able to claim that they "understand" anything "objectively." But allow this author to attempt a brief definition. Modernism was an optimistic confidence that human reason would solve man's problems. Postmodernism is a pessimistic cynicism that is convinced that reason itself is a "fiction" by which man fools himself into thinking that there is some kind of order to the chaos of the universe. Postmodernism is convinced that the objective truths on which modernism was built were nothing but the imagined creations of those who painted their own version of order over the chaos of the universe. Postmodernism is convinced that objective truths do not exist. Truth is nothing but a fiction! Truth is nothing more than a "construct" which cultures create in order to fool themselves into thinking that there is some rational explanation for all that happens. Objective truth (including all moral absolutes and religious dogma) is only a self-deception. Each culture constructs its own truth by which it justifies its ways and purpose. While that construction of reality may "work" for them, there is no objective truth behind the values of "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad." That culture has just defined its own perception of truth for their own advantage. In other words, all "truth" is really nothing more than a ploy by a culture to either keep or gain power by which that culture can dominate. You design your "truth" to keep control and to keep others down. Male culture arbitrarily subjugates women. White culture writes its rules to dominate those of other races. Heterosexual culture arbitrarily make the rules that makes social outcasts of gays. Postmodernism's cynicism has concluded that every claim to truth is just a mask for some political or social power play. Everything is political. Everything is a power play.

“For postmodern thinkers, who now dominate the arts, humanities, and social sciences of many universities, everything is a social construct. All claims to truth are rooted in cultural bias, so there is no objective truth. Ethical values are the product of unique cultural traditions, so there are no moral absolutes.” (Christian Witness in a Pluralistic Age, Jim Leffel, essay available on the Internet web sight of the Crossroads Project at [www.crossroads.org](http://www.crossroads.org))

Or to again quote Veith in *Postmodern Times*, “The intellect is replaced by the will. Reason is replaced by emotion. Morality is replaced by relativism. Reality itself becomes a social construct.” (page 29).

But what does that have to do with us and our ministry to our families and to our challenge of raising the children under our care to spiritual maturity? While as Christians we strive to be “in” the world but not “of” it, we know from our own hearts how much of an influence the world does indeed have on us. While the voices of modernism may be beginning to be stilled, the effects of its exalting of reason, its confidence in human potential, and its anti-supernatural world view have certainly made an impact on the church. And the new voices of postmodernism, with its rejection of reason and any objective truth, and with its exultation of creating your own little view of reality in which anything goes, will also be a temptation in one form or another to those who bear Christ’s name. We may try to console ourselves that these competing theories are nothing but the ivory tower debates of the philosophers, but secular philosophy always seeps into the popular psyche. Both the lies of modernism and the new lies of postmodernism will offer us challenges in ministry to our families and to individuals..

## **II. Challenges Facing our Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

### **A. Moral Relativism**

The first challenge we must deal with is the attitude toward morality that flows from postmodern thinking. If there is no such thing as absolute truth, if right and wrong are nothing but social constructs by which those in power try to subjugate those without power, if “good” or “evil” really are nothing more than fictions, then morality is a lie. If there are no absolutes, then no one has a right to tell anyone else that what they are doing is objectively wrong. The only thing that appears to be “wrong” is to label someone else’s actions to be “wrong.” “Acceptance” and “tolerance” are the only absolutes of the day.

And indeed, this way of thinking appears to be making serious headway into American pop culture. It is probably true that the average “man on the street” may not even have heard of the term postmodernism, and most likely couldn’t define it if he had heard the term. But popular culture is clearly affected by this moral relativism through the ever present influence of the electronic media. In a 1991 telephone poll conducted by the Princeton Religion Research Center (PRRC), 69% of Americans either strongly agreed (14%) or agreed (55%) with this statement, “There are few moral absolutes.” Only 7% strongly disagreed. The worst numbers appeared among those 30 and under. In that age group, 73% either strongly agreed (18%) or agreed (55%) with that statement. Only 4% of those under 30 strongly disagreed with that statement. (Religion in America: 1992-1993)

Now we might hasten to argue at this point that people have always practiced moral relativism. Sinful human nature has always loved to justify itself and rationalize away sin. But there does

appear to be a difference in the way people are soothing their consciences as they engage in the sins of their choosing.

“While people have always committed sins, they at least acknowledged these were sins. A century ago a person may have committed adultery flagrantly and in defiance of God and man, but he would have admitted that what he was doing was a sin. What we have today is not only immoral behavior, but a loss of moral criteria. This is true even in the church. We face not only a moral collapse but a collapse of meaning. ‘There are no absolutes.’” (Veith, page 18).

### **B. Religious Confusion**

As we see the dismantling of proud modernism with its bold attacks against supernaturally revealed truth, we might be tempted to cheer. Indeed modernism has been a formidable enemy of the church for more than two centuries. As Christians we may wish to shout “Amen!” as we hear the boastful claims of confidence in man’s reason and wisdom rejected. We watch with interest as the latest philosophy debunks as hopelessly naive modernism’s claim to be able to solve all of society’s problems. But we are pitifully naive if we believe that the culture will now come rushing back to Biblical Christianity. In the Middle East, the warring factions have a saying that states: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” But that statement does not prove true here. The fact that Christianity and postmodernism have a common enemy does not lead to amicable co-existence. It is not just the rational absolute truths of modernism that postmodernism proceeds to reject. It is all claims to objective truth that are rejected. “For example, modernists would argue in various ways that Christianity is not true. One hardly hears this objection anymore. Today the most common critique is that ‘Christians think they have the only truth.’ The claims of Christianity are not denied; they are rejected *because* they purport to be the truth.” (Veith, page 19). To the postmodern mind, all spiritual truth is nothing more than a personal story by which you comfort yourself if you choose to believe it. If it “works for you” that’s fine, but don’t try to pass off your truth as something reliable and objective to anyone else. To use a postmodern term, all of Christianity is nothing more than a “meta-narrative,” an overarching story by which a culture attempts to make sense out of the chaos of existence. There is no objective truth to any “meta-narrative.” Every culture simply creates their own “meta-narrative.” Thus all of Christianity, with its truths and values - is dismissed as nothing but the shared fiction of a culture. Christianity may be useful for those who feel emotionally attached to it. But if Christians try to “force” their views on others, then it is nothing but another power play (designed to keep others down and out of power).

Again, the typical American may shake his head at such philosophical playing with words. And indeed there are some statistics that seem to show that Christianity is holding its ground in America. After all, the same PRRC telephone poll found that an astounding 81% of Americans believed that the Bible was either the literal Word of God (32%) or the inspired Word of God (49%). Unfortunately, for many in America such high verbal respect for the Bible appears to be not much more than lip service to the revered religious book of previous generations. To quote from *Absolute Confusion: The Barna Report 3, 1993-1994*: “People’s Bible knowledge is abysmally thin: They cannot name half of the Ten Commandments, or who preached the Sermon on the Mount.” Perhaps even more stunning is the rapid growth of eastern religions and neo-paganism in our society. And while the numbers who outwardly “convert” to such deceptions may be relatively small, the influence of eastern mysticism and paganism can be seen

everywhere. Or haven't you noticed the proliferation of 1-900 psychic hot-lines, or the startling fact several polls have shown that over 50% of Americans either believe in reincarnation or are convinced that the teaching has some merit! Americans are more and more treating religious beliefs as items on a grand spiritual cafeteria line. You pick and choose from what you "like," and of course, according to postmodern dogma, no one can say that your choices are wrong or hopelessly contradictory, after all, there is no objective basis upon which to base such a judgment. "Those who feared the takeover of communism rallied against the dangers of America becoming a godless nation. They need not fear: we will become just the opposite, a nation filled with many gods." (George Barna, *The Frog in the Kettle*, Ventura California: Regal Books, 1990, page 122)

All of which leads us to another "post" that fits with postmodernism. Our country, for all its outward fascination with things "spiritual," seems to clearly have reached a "post-Christian" era. While we will disagree with some evangelical historians about how "Christian" America truly ever was, there was at least a general knowledge of the basic Biblical facts. Up until the time that the baby boomers began raising their children, if you weren't Jewish, you most likely had some kind of Christian instruction in your youth. At least in its outward form, Christianity had a tremendous influence on American culture. But that has changed dramatically in the past three decades. Modernism successfully pulled much of Western culture away from its Biblical roots as it downplayed the need for God and debunked much of the Bible as nothing but unenlightened superstition. Postmodern culture is indeed far more open to things spiritual, but it is returning not back to the Bible and its objective truth for all mankind, but rather to anything and everything else that subjectively seems to appeal to them. In place of the Biblical worldview, western culture is opening itself to an eclectic mix of spirituality in which each person is free to pick and chose whatever seems right to him or her. "There is one major fact about culture that we Christians must realize: We have moved into a post-Christian society. The influence of Christian values and the Biblical worldview have all but disappeared. In public schools and universities, in the art world and media, there is little trace of Christianity; in the intellectual and culture-making establishments, it can scarcely get a hearing. Though millions of Americans still are avid churchgoers, religion is tolerated only as a private, inner set of convictions, with little presence in the *culture*." (Gene Edward Veith, "Our Culture, Our Church, Our Challenge," *Lutheran Witness*, June 1998, page 11)

And when it comes to Christianity's claim to have the one truth that can save the world, that is also falling into disfavor. The theoretical concept of "no such thing as absolute truth" is filtering its way down to pop culture as it is reflected in the growing belief that all religions, whatever they teach, are perfectly fine. To the Lutheran we now will recognize a spiritually deadly double attack on what we share. Moral relativism seeks to blunt the law's call to repentant. Refusing to accept absolute truth seeks to muffle the gospel's call to the Savior. To quote *Absolute Confusion: The Barna Report, 1993-94*, we find these statistics to report when 1000 people were given this statement to respond to: "It does not matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life." 62% either strongly agreed (38%) or somewhat agreed (24%) with that statement. Of course, we could boldly insist that at least our WELS people would never believe such a deceptive lie, however our confidence may be somewhat shaky. In a recent survey of Lutheran beliefs conducted by Lutheran Brotherhood, Lutherans from the ELCA, LCMS, and the WELS were asked to respond to this statement:

“Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God.” It probably doesn’t surprise us that 75% of ELCA Lutherans either agreed (41% ) or probably agreed (34%) with that statement. What may shock and disappoint us greatly, is that 47% of WELS Lutherans either agreed (25%) or probably agreed (22%) with that same statement! Let’s hope and pray they were simply confused by the question. Otherwise, together with many in our country, an appallingly high percentage of our own members appear to believe that Jesus was speaking only relatively when he proclaimed, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).**

### **C. Depressing Cynicism and Skepticism**

Think back again to the postmodern belief that finally each sub-culture’s claim to truth is nothing but a selfish reaching for power and control. Every group plays with language to create their own truth to get ahead. Each culture has an angle and uses language to try to gain or hold power. And while we might try to console ourselves with the hope that this is nothing more than the debates of philosophers in the universities, there is again a clear and powerful impact on popular culture. We live in a society that is growing in cynicism and skepticism. Why wasn’t America more stunned by the lies and deceptions from their White House? Why were the spin doctors able to turn the focus to the apparent hypocrisy of house members prosecuting a president for activity all too common among them? Could it be that Americans already have such a cynical view of their politicians that they were indeed convinced that all it was was one set of crooked politicians trying to oust another crooked politician? For further evidence of a skeptical and cynical population, just tune in to so-called “conservative” talk radio as the pundits play on the almost “paranoid” fear of many Americans.

There is one last thought to add in this area. Perhaps topping the list for what makes the skepticism and cynicism of postmodernism so depressing, is the postmodern denial that each person has a self-identity. The idea of an antonymous “self” is denied by postmodernism. You are what your sub-culture has made you. Your personal identify is lost in the world created for you by the group to which you belong. The self ceases to exist and blends anonymously into the group.

### **D. Anger and Violence**

And watch out for those groups! What is truly ironic is that the movement that claims to be fostering a “tolerant” and “open” society is in fact feeding a growing monster of anger and violence in our world. There are two trends of postmodern life that are feeding the Garden-of-Eden-old sinful human tendency toward anger and violence. Telling us over and over again that we cannot “judge” anything in someone else’s culture because our own cultural bias makes us hopelessly subjective, does nothing but separate and isolate us into tiny little sub-cultures that have no way of truly communicating with each other and no way to get along with each other. Then add to the explosive mix the cynical distrust that comes from believing that everyone else’s sub-culture is trying exploit your sub-culture (it’s all the politics of power, right?). What do you get from this unholy mix of isolationism and cynicism? You end up with sub-cultures that abandon trying to ‘get along’ and instead are urged to become militant seekers of power and influence. Every culture is encouraged to see itself as the victim of some other culture from which they must free themselves. And so gay rights activists try to wear down their opponents

with ever cruder attacks. Militant feminism seeks to gain power over male dominance, presumably to murder the unborn in ever more grotesque ways.

But it isn't just on the "left" that anger and violence become the order of the day. Bomb wielding pro-life extremists jettison legal methods of trying to save the unborn for murder and mayhem. Paranoid armed militias plot and plan to make America "safe" again for white males. Isolated and rejected teens from ridiculed sub-cultures ("Goths," for example) take up arms and gun down classmates from the "in" sub-cultures whose power has rejected them in the culture of their school. Even personal anger seems to be following suit and riding ever closer to the surface. Isn't that what is revealed in slogans like "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more" and the road rage violence that mars our highways. And could this angry and violent turn of our culture also be illustrated even by choices for leisure activity? Consider that this past summer, seven of the fifteen top rated television shows on cable television featured professional wrestling of either the W.F. or AC variety. Consistently, the top two programs in cable rankings are both professional wrestling shows with each one drawing a weekly audience of 7,000,000 viewers. Take a look at many of the most popular video games the next time you are walking through the computer department of a local store. Games with graphic violence are consistently among the most popular games. And thanks to the latest in video game technology, you can gun people down in 3-D gore!

#### **E. Escapism**

If everyone creates his own reality, and there is nothing real anyway, you might as well create as personally pleasant an illusion as possible. That tenant of postmodernism seems to have been adopted wholesale by much of America. Millions are now creating their own cyber reality as the internet becomes the fasting growing addiction. Cyber-sex and cyber-gambling are the two most popular (and profitable) vices pandering to on-line escapism. Newsweek magazine, in its September 20, 1999 edition, reported that "In June Americans spent more time on health sites than porn sites for the first time, but more than half the requests on search engines are 'adult-oriented' ...25 percent of teens in a recent survey conducted by Yankelovich Partners and Websense Inc. said they had visited x-rated sites" (page 61).

But people aren't just escaping into the black hole of the internet, America's obsession with sports may be the most popular escape from reality. Thanks to ever increasing cable sports networks, you now have many choices on what sporting event to watch 24 hours a day (even "classic events" from years ago on networks devoted to nothing but reruns!) And then there's in-person gambling that is exploding in our country. How else but escapism (and greedy hit-it-rich dreams) do you explain America's obsession with gambling in every form imaginable? And we haven't even mentioned the millions who regularly escape every day to their own private worlds at the bottom of a bottle or the end of a needle. And what has all this to do with postmodernism? If your life has no absolute meaning and nothing else really matters either, then the pursuit of pleasure and excitement in whatever form becomes for many the epitome of existence. Why not escape for a time and forget that none of this makes sense anyway?

Of course, none of these trends (moral relativism, religious pluralism, etc), and the many more we could list, should surprise us one bit. He who is the Author of history warned us through the Apostle Paul long ago. **"But mark this: three will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their**



**parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God - having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).**

### **III. Proceed with Confidence!**

“So, Timothy,” Paul went on, “Those who live in the last days should just circle the wagons and pray for the end. Nothing they can do will stem the tide of evil. They should just retreat into their German Lutheran ghetto and just hope the world leaves them alone!” No, that wasn’t exactly the spirit of what Paul had to say to Timothy and to us about how to carry out ministry in the last days. Here’s what Paul had to say, “You know, Timothy, in those last days, there is going to be a great revival of religious faith. That nation that will be called America will once again become a Christian land. Christians will either take control of the political machine, or they will take up their assault weapons and fight to take back the culture and set up a theocracy in Washington D.C. that will be the envy of anything ever set up in Geneva!” No, wait a minute, Paul didn’t say that either. How could he! He would have contradicted the clear words of Jesus that predict not a great awakening but a great apostasy. Indeed, the most subtle form of millennialism is the belief that a great day for the visible Christian Church is right around the corner. That is the “theology of glory” which awaits fulfillment in the kingdom of God. For this life, we trust that Scripture holds before us a “theology of the cross.” We are going to struggle and suffer - and in postmodern times that suffering may once again take on an ancient physical dimension as we more and more are perceived as dangerously intolerant and closed minded. It is going to be an ugly struggle against the forces of evil, and it will often appear that we are losing. But that still does not bring us back to circling the wagons and hoping that none of the natives pierce our defenses.

Listen instead to the confident and powerful words of encouragement which Paul *actually* spoke to his young son in the faith, Timothy.

**“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”**

As bleak as we have painted things (and there are many who paint things bleaker still!), what is Paul’s encouragement to us? He puts himself under oath to the living God and commands us to **“Preach the Word!”** Our mission has not changed. Our task remains the same. Turn loose on the world the sword of the Spirit, the **“living and active” (Hebrews 4:12)** word of God! With **“great patience and careful instruction”** we are to **“correct, rebuke and encourage.”** Yes, it may seem that preaching a law of unchanging right and wrong and a gospel of absolute truth is **“out of season”** in a relativistic and pluralistic age. Yes, it means that we will need the Spirit’s strength to **“keep your head in every situation, [and] endure [the] hardship”** that is bound to

come our way as we ignore the politically correct “mantras” of tolerance [of sin] and openness [to spiritual deceptions]. But have no fear, as we **“do the work of an evangelist”** God’s Holy Spirit will still add to the ranks of the faithful more of those whose names are written in his book of life. As we **“discharge all the duties of [the] ministry,”** the Spirit will, again through Word and Sacrament, preserve and defend and finally glorify his remnant of faithful people who are still the apple of his eye. The challenges we mentioned above are immense. But the power of the sword of the Spirit is greater still. No lies of Satan will ever be a match for the truth of God. No deeds of darkness will ever snuff out the Light of the world who has brought life and immortality to light through his gospel. Therefore, in this postmodern world...

#### **IV. Proceed with Spiritual Wisdom**

As this paper proceeds to listing ministry plans that move ahead with confidence to do the Lord’s work in a postmodern world, the author needs to add two “provisos.” First: as important as it is to recognize the impact of postmodernism on modern culture, please remember that the statements made in this paper are obviously generalizations. Many individuals to whom we minister may have been spared, by the grace of God, from most if not almost all of the influences of both modernism and postmodernism. Many of these will have come from strong Christian homes (rebuilding such homes was the planned main thrust of the group discussions) where God provided them with a powerful shield against the impact of our culture. Others will still be struggling with the doubts and questions planted by a rationalistic and humanistic modernism. And still others, especially those on university campuses, will indeed be very much in danger of the influence of postmodernism. Both with our own members, and with the unchurched we meet, we will need to be very careful to discern what is behind what is shared with us before we can speak to the heart of the matter.

Secondly, please remember that this paper was only a background piece to a “live” workshop and small group discussions on ministry plans to strengthen Christian families in this post modern age. It is impossible for one man to pontificate on paper and match the specific ministry ideas that will fit the many different situations in which we carry out the Lord’s work. Therefore, please excuse the rather “general” nature of the ministry ideas with which this paper concludes. They are only here to spark thoughtful and prayerful planning of aggressive ministry with and to the families in our care and beyond to the culture that surrounds us.

#### **1. Don’t Give Up On Doctrine!**

It may seem paradoxical, but what our members and the unbelieving world need in the shallowness of postmodern ir-rationalism are those who continue to **“watch [their] life and [their] doctrine closely.”** Against the dark background of the shallowness of a world in which we are told that everything is changing and everything is relative, the power and beauty of unchanging truth will sparkle all the more brilliantly. Rejoice again yourself in the wonderful intricacies of God’s marvelous plan of salvation, and teach your people to love the doctrines of the Word as well.

In particular, in both youth and adult catechesis, we need to give special emphasis to the truth that not only is Christ the Savior, but that **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)** Certainly we have been teaching that in the past, but there is a renewed sense of urgency in our ecumenical age to proclaim that with special fervor. And in order to prepare our people to speak the faith

clearly in their lives, we need to make better use of discussion that helps them to learn to discern the lies of Satan and apply the truth to real life situations. We need to discuss with both children and adults a multitude of ways to present the unique beauty of the garments of salvation in a world that thinks any old tattered rag of deception will do. Indeed, give the children and adults plenty of opportunities right in class to practice giving **“an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15)** As they discuss, teach them to base every thought on the clear word of God and not on human emotion or intuition. Build them up with the gospel so that, as they take their faith to the world, they know without a doubt that the truth of the gospel is not for apologizing but for proclaiming. Remind them not to be discouraged when at least at first they are labeled as intolerant and close minded for proclaiming objective and exclusive truth. Remind your people that, on the last day, as all stand before Jesus of Nazareth as the Judge of the living and the dead, there will not be one person who will be remarking how intolerant or close minded the whole situation is.

## **2. But Don't Be Doctrinaire**

Please be aware that these comments are being made by someone who loves dogmatics and actually finds it “fun” to teach it! However, to be straight as a gun barrel and just as cold was the sin of Elihu as he vainly tried to comfort Job. Much of what he said was correct, but did you ever notice that both Job and God ignore him after he gets done speaking? Job was not comforted by a truth that was delivered to him without compassion. Both God and Job dismiss Elihu almost as if he wasn't there! It's almost as if he never said a word!

In a postmodern logic and reason are considered invalid. Emotion, intuition and surface impressions rule. We dare not let that change our content, but we must understand the context. If we fail to communicate compassion as we strive to communicate the truth, we may lose the opportunity to be heard both with the next generation of our own people and certainly with those on the outside. Remember, many in the postmodern world are cynical and skeptical about finding anyone who isn't out to “get something” from them. (In the sinful world of the last days where love is growing cold their skepticism isn't paranoia, all too often it is necessary for survival!) If our lives repel them before they even give us a chance to share the Word with them, we will have missed the opportunity to unleash on them the power of the Spirit. However, genuine love and compassion lived by us and felt by them, combined with genuine love and compassion then spoken by us and heard by them, that is a beautiful combination! The Apostle Paul had a “catchy phrase” for that. He called it **“speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)**.

## **3. Be Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak**

You may hear some awful things come out of the mouths of many of your teens and young adults. Before you reach for the largest hammer in your law tool box, probe a little more deeply with some questions and then listen intently for the answers. Yes, you already know that the sinful nature is talking. But you need to know more. Find out first if that teen or young adult is merely parroting something from popular culture that they themselves don't truly believe. The lies are confusing them, but they don't need to be dealt with as a heretic, but as an erring brother or sister.

This being **“quick to listen and slow to speak”** also is a must when dealing with the unchurched. With all the different philosophies out there in the world, we need to let that

prospect reveal which particular lies of Satan have them deceived. You need to find out what their “worldview” is. Are you dealing with a confident, humanistic modernist who believes that only the material world counts? Well then, (for instance) proceed to the empty life of the rich fool and then proceed to true riches in Christ (Luke 12). Are you dealing with a skeptical, relativistic postmodernist who believes that there is nothing to believe in and yet who dabbles in things spiritual because it is the “in” thing to do? Begin with Paul’s words to the “postmodern” Athenians of his day, **“I see that in every way that you are very religious!”** It is interesting to note that Paul’s word for **“religious”** also carries the connotation of “superstitious.” Paul was mixing a compliment (at least you are concerned about things “spiritual”) with the beginning of his rebuke (all other paths are deception, only one path leads to eternal life).

Also, if you are dealing with a true “postmodern,” take comfort in the fact that for most people, postmodern ideas are only very “skin deep.” Postmodernism even considers shallowness and being a slave to ever changing fads the way to live. Few postmoderns are so thoroughly cynical that they would truly resemble Pontius Pilate who sneered, **“What is truth!” (John 18:38)** They have not thought through their relativism and pluralism to its utterly ridiculous conclusions. A few searching questions may go a long way in helping them to stumble all over their own shallow lines of thought and open the door for sharing the truth that really does exist.

The many different people we will meet with the many different worldviews of this postmodern age provides us with an opportunity to re-evaluate our “typical” way of beginning a presentation of law and gospel. Have we considered carefully just how much Biblical knowledge is assumed in the two “key questions” as we call them (“If you were to die tonight...,” “If God were to say, why should I let you into my heaven...”)? Those questions were good and useful for many prospects in the past decades since the vast majority of them had some Christian training in their youth. Those questions assume a general knowledge of who the true God is. They assume a basic understanding that there is such a thing as heaven and hell. Much of the typical “Great Exchange” type presentation that follows also makes assumptions that when we speak of “Good Friday” and “Easter” that there will be some glimmer of recognition. Such an approach is certainly valid with our straying sheep and those who have strayed from the Christian Church. But with both casual thoroughgoing modernists and postmodernists, the typical approach may be both too abrupt and very confusing. “God who?” “Heaven and hell?” “After I die I’m going to be reincarnated.” “What do you mean by that word `sin’?” We will need all the wisdom the Spirit can give as we listen and learn where to begin with those whose spirituality is of the casual cafeteria style.

#### **4. Hold Before God’s People and Our World the Beauty of True Multi-Culturalism**

The postmodern world pays lip service to the term multi-culturalism. They speak the party line that all cultures are equally good. And yet, as we mentioned, the cultures engage in language games to strive for power and influence over other cultures leads them to trust no one except those who are from their own tiny sub-culture. The very dogma that is supposed to lead to tolerance and open mindedness actually ends up in culture wars and ethnic cleansing and battles for the gay agenda.

How much better to hold before God's people and the world the one true multi-cultural institution in the world - the Holy Christian Church! The Communion of Saints is the living and breathing body of Christ made up of souls from **“every nation and tribe and people and language”** who in Jesus Christ have become one people with one language - the language of God's saving grace. Here there truly is **“neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29)**

Understand the amazing context of those words of Paul! Those words were written as the champions of Judaic culture were trying to exercise their power over those who came from the Hellenistic culture. Paul, on the other hand, was exposing them to the unity in diversity “culture” of the body of Christ. The early Christian Church struggled to learn to rejoice in the unity (common faith in Christ) in diversity (a people gathered from every nation with different God given gifts) that was and is God's plan for his Church. With Peter, many in early Christianity had trouble learning what Peter needed to hear three times in one day from his Lord, **“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”**

Of course, if we are going to be able to hold before the world the beauty of the unity amid diversity (in the Biblical sense) in the body of Christ, we must overcome the same challenge in the visible church today. We WELS people need to be reminded that our mission is not to make our church a haven for people who are outwardly just like us. The mission of the Church is to make our church a haven for people who are inwardly just like us - sinners in need of a Savior. That means welcoming as a living and breathing part of us all those whom the Lord leads to repentance and faith. It doesn't matter how outwardly culturally different they may be. Where those differences are in matters of adiaphora, our goal is not to make them outwardly look just like us.

## **5. Do Everything Possible To Strengthen the Family with the Word**

Modernism with its humanistic drive for success and self-actualization was poison to the selfless love and commitment it takes to raise a family. Much of postmodernism's appeal among Generation X may come from the hopelessness and displacement so many feel from growing up in houses that were never homes. As we consider how many have been abandoned and farmed out to the care of others by parents they hardly knew, perhaps we gain a bit of an understanding of the skepticism and cynicism and hopelessness of the current age.

Those same forces at work in our world to destroy the family have blown like a tropical storm through our churches as well. Yes, we thank God for the countless strong Christian families that have weathered those storms because of foundations on the rock of the Word. But there is considerable damage control to that needs to be done in the homes of many of our members. All too many have now grown up in Christian homes where family devotions and personal Bible study were relics of grandpa and grandma's day. All too many have grown up with the TV as their most frequent teacher of morals and values. The concept of being a Christian family empowered by the Word regularly shared together is something far too few of our people have experienced.. Certainly those brought to faith as adults from non Christian homes have never seen how the Christian family is to function.

But then again, neither had any of the adult confirmands of the Apostle Paul either. Christian teaching was counter cultural then as well. That fact didn't hinder the Spirit any then. As we apply the Word to the lives of God's people today, the Spirit won't be hindered in doing his work now. It would be subtle millennialism to boldly proclaim that we can turn American society around in its view towards marriage and family. However, it would be not so subtle spiritual defeatism to say that the Spirit can't work that growth in our congregations.

But remember our tool. The heart and core of the Christian home is the in-dwelling of the Word incarnate through the sharing of the Word inspired. From the time we prepare God's people for marriage, through all the years of raising their children, and on into the golden years of life, we need to not just urge them to be in the Word, we need to teach them and model for them how to do personal devotions, how to read the Word together as a couple, and how to gather the family around the Word. The Spirit does not enter our homes by osmosis apart from the Word. We are not enthusiasts waiting for some great charismatic awakening or some inner light to shine. However, God has promised us his Spirit where his Word is found. Next to the effort that goes into making our public worship the best it can be in liturgy and proclamation, there is no task in the church today worth more of our prime time and efforts than the task of reforming the Christian home to be once again the greenhouse of the faith under the bright light of the Word. After all, we are the spiritual descendants of the great reformer who was not too busy write his friend Peter the barber and teach him how to pray!

## **6. Yes, Their Attention Is Drifting!**

Please excuse me for pointing this out, but your audience is drifting! A society raised on the rapid fire, often disjointed, visual medium of television is losing the skill to reason and think in depth. Ours is a sound bite world of short unrelated messages all clamoring for their fifteen seconds of attention.

“Visual images are presented, rapid-fire, with little sense of context or connection. To find examples, just turn on the TV. I did. In five minutes on CNN, I watched segments on whaling, a political election, a sex scandal, and a royal wedding. Then followed commercials for a theme park, deodorant, shampoo, and yeast infection medicine. On news programs, coverage of major political events will be juxtaposed with hype for the latest movie. Images of starving children in Africa will be followed by Madonna's latest video. Television undercuts any sense of coherence, consistency, and unity for its viewers.

Cable television has produced a new way to watch the tube, further fragmenting our perceptions. Since there are so many channels and so many choices, cable viewers use their remote controls to “channel-surf” CAN and MTV, old Westerns and the Sci-Fi channel, watching a few seconds from a black and white Fred Astaire movie, catching a joke from an *Andy Griffith* rerun, and then flashing over to watch cars blow up on the movie of the week.” (Veith, page 81)

Such rapid fire disconnection trivializes real issues and makes us callous to human suffering. It also powerfully alters the way we process information. It renders us apathetic and passive in the reception of information, and most devastatingly of all (from the point of view of Christian education) it destroys our abilities to do logical and detailed reasoning. A video culture does

nothing for training us to actively engage our minds into the logical depths of a closely reasoned sermon or catechism lesson.

What is adding to the phenomenon of the ever shrinking attention span (at the risk of lashing you to the “post” one more time) is also the fact that we are now living in a “post-literate” society. “Some, half seriously, date ‘post-literate’ culture to 1985, the first year that more videos were rented than library books checked out. It’s not that people don’t buy books any more; the explosion of trendy bookstore-cum-coffee shops demonstrates the contrary. It’s just that few people read the books they buy.” (Kelm, page 13.) Reading a book is for sequential thinkers. How else can you make it from beginning to end without keeping the details of the story or event clearly in mind? It focuses attention. It allows for depth of meaning.

So what does the shortening attention span and loss of in depth reasoning skills mean for our preaching and our teaching? Does it mean that we must inevitably give in to the great damming down of the faith? Hardly. We cannot water down the Word of God to cater to the culture. But we can make sure that in our teaching we use plenty of windows. Please excuse the cryptic comment. It comes from a brother in the ministry. His wise vicar year bishop once remarked that his sermon lacked “windows,” illustrations to throw some concrete light on the abstract doctrinal statements. After all, isn’t that how the greatest teacher of the pre-literate era taught? Jesus teaching is full of windows - full of living, breathing, every day life illustrations. Check out just a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. There is salt and light and people leaving gifts before altars to run and be reconciled. There are thieves breaking in to steal the treasures of this life, and birds that do not sow or reap, and flowers that are thrown into the fire. Consider also how God dealt with the pre-literate people of Israel. How much of his teaching to them was in story and picture!

Therefore, as we step into confirmation class, we cannot consider our task accomplished if we put together a tightly reasoned logical outline that we expect them to memorize verbatim. Our lesson must have walls, obviously, but make sure there are plenty of windows. As we step into the pulpit, don’t forget that dogmatics essays are good and useful at the Seminary and for pastors’s conferences, but they are tedious from the pulpit. As Professors Balge and Gerlach remind us, **“The wise preacher will know how to distinguish between preaching doctrine and lecturing on dogmatics. The first is a legitimate part of teaching; the second is out of place in the pulpit.”** (Preach the Gospel, Balge and Gerlach, NPH, 1982, page 5). Again, don’t tear down all the walls and tell nothing but disjointed stories, but do illustrate and specifically apply (the law) and appropriate (the gospel) to your people’s hearts and lives.

## **7. Remember Your Work Is Never in Vain**

The greatest fear of the author of this paper, is that this essay will have spent so much time pointing out problems and challenges, that we fail to rejoice in the Lord for all the wonderful things he has done for us and our congregations through his Word. By the grace of God, the work of his kingdom has gone on among us despite the swirling storms of secular culture in which we live. We do not need to timidly retreat from the world in which God has called us to be actively engaged as his witnesses. Instead, we thank God that he shields us from destruction under the shadow of his gracious wings, enabling us to be both in the world, but still not of it.

Indeed, in whatever days still remain of the world's history, we know that Satan will make sure that there are plenty of dangerous storms for us to weather. He is full of rage against God and his people. He knows that his time is short. But we know something else that is more important. In the pages of Scripture, we have seen the end of the struggle. It is a glorious victory for Christ and his Church. Brothers, the best encouragement that can be given to followers of the risen and gloriously exalted Savior is that which Paul gave to the Corinthians. **“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).** Don't let the winds of changing culture with all the challenges that it brings for ministry make you afraid or discouraged. Study the times. Be wise as you discharge all the duties of your ministry. But most of all, as you dispense the life giving means of grace, remember, it is never in vain!



## *A Comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism*

**Modernism:** Man's *reason* (4) using the *scientific method* (1) enables *man* (2) to *solve all problems* (3) for the *only existence that counts* (5) - this life.

**S** scientific

**H** humanistic

**O** optimistic

**R** rationalistic

**T** terminalistic (this life is "terminal," only this visible existence counts; materialistic)

**Postmodernism:** Everyone's world view is a *futile* (4) attempt by his *culture* (1) to construct an orderly system of really *arbitrary moral values* (2) *when there really is no order* (3). Cultures engage in this constructing of reality to gain or hold power over others. Existence is merely accepting the *spiritual* (5) and material chaos of the universe.

**D** dehumanizing ("I" don't matter; my culture creates me: fads, anger, power struggles)

**R** relativistic (morality is a social construct)

**I** irrational (a post-literate, MTV world, of unconnected sound bytes, accept the chaos)

**P** pessimistic (all language is nothing but power games as everyone tries to gain power over everyone else; everyone has an angle)

**S** spiritualistic (acceptance of a spiritual dimension of life in a pluralistic, religious cafeteria style: whatever "works" for you)

All world views are nothing but *short drips* that will ebb and flow because none of them is founded on the true God and his saving truth. While each possess "**drips**" of truth because of implanted law, yet their time on the world stage will be "**short**." Each presents unique challenges and unique opportunities to the Christian Church if we are willing to love lost and straying souls enough to pay attention to the times and then apply timeless truth. We need to search for *points of contact* and then move to *points of disagreement* as we witness with great wisdom and patience.