

2. Evangelism in a Postmodern Age

Introduction

On Monday, Dr. Pittelko helped us to understand the “what” of evangelism. What does it mean to go to the ends of the earth? Yesterday, Dr. Gibbs spoke of the “when” of evangelism. “Now is the day of salvation.” Today, we want to consider the “where.” What is the context in which the Good News is to be shared?

All evangelism is done in a context. Jesus addressed the context of the Samaritan woman at the well. Paul spoke to the context of the Athenians on Mars Hill when he proclaimed the “unknown God.” The Apostle desired to be all things to all people that by all possible means he might win them (1 Cor. 9:22). The culture provides the context.

We live in what has become a new and strange cultural context. We are experiencing an alleged paradigm shift similar to the time of the Renaissance, or the industrial revolution, or the advent of the age of enlightenment. As Bob Dylan put it, “The times, they are a-changin’.” We are moving from the modern age to what is being called post-modernism.

What are the tenets of postmodernism? In the time allotted to us, we will seek to understand this strange way of thinking and design a potential strategy for reaching this generation with the Good News of the Gospel.

The issues raised by postmodernism are not simple. We can only scratch the surface. For further study, I have included at the end a selected bibliography. On your own, you might also want to read the endnotes.

The Modern Age

Human reason, education, science, and technology defined the modern age. Man with his enlightened understanding and technological genius had within his grasp, so he thought, the possibility of engineering a great society—or at least a very good one. We desired human growth and the pursuit of excellence. We were dedicated to ideals. Our fathers and grandfathers willingly sacrificed their lives on foreign soil to see the triumph of good over evil. We sought education, wisdom, and knowledge for its own sake, not merely for the income that we could derive from it. As a nation, we attempted, with a good level of success, to export our culture, our ideals, our values, and our political system into the world community so that freedom and democracy would mark every society.

As a church we responded to the rationalism of the modern age by pursuing a sound doctrinal theology built upon a biblical foundation. We developed an educated clergy who were equipped to confront modern, educated people. We trusted the efficacy of the Gospel to break into the human heart with the light of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The rationalism and scientific inquiry of the modern age clarified our mission. We were not about confronting reason with reason. We were a people of Law and Gospel who depended upon the Holy Spirit to convict sinners and produce saving faith.



Disillusionment

From the perspective of a new breed of philosophers and social critics, this modern age has crumbled around us. Human reason as the instrument of progress has allegedly failed. The Second World War demonstrated that the age of reason and enlightenment had produced very little in the way of human evolution. In the years following the war, this disillusionment was compounded by the rise of the Communist ideology, the Vietnam fiasco, weapons of mass destruction, youth rebellions, assassinations, political corruption, racial wars, and gas shortages.

While the modern age produced many technological advancements and successes, they had their drawbacks. The automobile, for example, created a mobile society, but it also polluted the environment. While modern technology improved our lot in life, it trashed Mother Earth. Consequently, philosophers and social critics began to question our ability to produce a great society via human reason, knowledge, and technology.

When did this modern era seemingly end? Some point to the Second World War while others say the modern age ended with the baby-boomer youth rebellions and the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. One sociologist has pinpointed the end of the modern age of reason and enlightenment to a day in 1972 when the Pruitt-Igo housing development here in Saint Louis was blown up. Once standing as a classic example of social engineering, high crime, the difficulty of policing, and urine-soaked elevators caused its demise. Thomas Oden suggests that the modern age lasted exactly 200 years from the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to the pulling down of the Berlin Wall. Whenever this alleged paradigm shift occurred, many suggest that the mod-

ern age, for all practical purposes, is over! Welcome to post-modernity. We are living in a new age.

The Relativity of Truth

The postmodern mindset offers to the Christian church a unique challenge. Unlike the modern rationalist, the post-modernist will not challenge the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He will merely say, "Yes, but it is your truth." The issue is no longer truth versus error, or right versus wrong, as was the case in the modern age. The concept of error, or wrong has been removed from the postmodern vocabulary with one exception—it is wrong to say that someone's worldview, religion, culture, philosophy, or experience is wrong. It is an error to say that someone is in error.

While the postmodern philosophy has sounded the death knell of classic liberal theology, the rationalism of the modern age has been replaced with postmodern relativism.¹ For the postmodern thinker, truth is relative and emerges out of a specific community or culture. It is neither objective truth nor absolute truth since such categories, in the post-modern mindset, do not exist. The new multiculturalism, for example, validates every culture as being equal. Only those seeking to exercise power over other people will claim that their way of living is better than the way others live. The same is true of religion. For the postmodernist, Christians have their truth, Muslims have their truth, and the proponents of the New Age philosophy have their truth.²

Not only is the claim of absolute truth rejected, but those who claim to possess such truth are scorned. While the postmodern thinker freely adopts all the open-minded religions of the world, those narrow-minded Christians who claim to have absolute truth—which must be believed in order to be saved—are the objects of scorn and ridicule. It is such haughty individuals who cause nation to rise against nation, people against people, ideology against ideology, and, of course, religion against religion. While we have the right to declare our truth, we do not have the right to criticize "the truth" of others.³ Only mean-spirited people seek to exercise power over others by saying, "I am right, and you are wrong."

As the postmodern philosophy has invaded the church, the result has been "a kinder and gentler theology." For the postmodern theologian, polemics, the practice of exposing error and heresy, is no longer wedded to dogmatics since it is politically incorrect to consider any theological system wrong. Heresy no longer exists.⁴

Consequently, the postmodern age has produced a new approach to ecumenicity. It is no longer necessary for denominations to resolve obvious doctrinal differences by poring over the text of Scripture. In fact, for one group of Christians to claim they have the correct understanding of the Scripture pertaining to their doctrine is arrogance. The new approach does not seek to resolve differences but to merely discover a common language in which to tell the respective stories.

In his classic book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Dr. Allan Bloom wrote, "It might not have been the best of times when Catholics and Protestants were at each other's throats, but at least they knew what they believed."

From Rationalism to Irrationalism

In the modern age, the rationalist questioned the supernatural nature of the Christian message. Miracles, a virgin birth, and a resurrection were outside the purview of modern science and therefore unreasonable. Today, nothing is unreasonable. Outlandish claims that would have been rejected by the modern rationalist are allowed to stand as private truth by the postmodernist. Truth no longer corresponds with objective, evidential reality. Many today claim they have been abducted by aliens. If their claims are challenged, the usual irrational response is "How do you know that it didn't happen?" Obviously, you don't, since it is logically impossible to prove a negative. Therefore, it is your responsibility to let them have "their truth," no matter how absurd their claims might be.

The postmodern mentality is not openly critical of any brand of spirituality. Books promoting the author's spiritual experience, which would have been dismissed as fantasy if not bordering on insanity in the age of reason, are now accepted as a legitimate expression of the author's search for spiritual meaning.

Consider, for example, how the media responded to the recent Heaven's Gate suicide compared to the response some years ago to the events in Jonestown. While demented Jim Jones, according to the media, led a group of disenfranchised paranoids to their death, Marshall Applewhite, the Heaven's Gate guru, led his well-educated, well-adjusted followers to fulfill their spiritual convictions. The *New York Times* raised the question, "what was the underlying pathology that led such seemingly bright and articulate people to a tragic misjudgment?"

Misjudgment? When I hit a 6 iron instead of a 5 iron and come up short of the green, that's a misjudgment. If I should eat poisoned pudding thinking that I am leaving behind my physical container in order to ascend to a higher level of existence on a spacecraft hiding in the tail of the Hale-Bopp Comet—that's insanity!

Postmodern spirituality also appreciates Jesus. He was a great teacher and an enlightened spiritual master who accepted and experienced His "Christ-consciousness," as we are also capable of doing.⁵ Jesus is not the unique Son of God, Savior of the world, and the exclusive way to the heavenly Father.⁶ He is another Jesus. He is not the Jesus promised in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament.

This again presents a unique challenge. We have to overcome a former way of thinking. In the past, if people claimed to believe in Jesus we usually embraced them as Christians because the only people who really believed in Jesus were Christians. The exceptions, of course, were the classic cults: Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. Today, every new spirituality, without exception, has something nice to say about Jesus.⁷ Therefore, to avoid confusion, we must clearly define our terms.

Consistent with the swinging of a pendulum, the age of rationalism has been replaced with the age of irrationalism.⁸

Deconstructing Words

Of all of the notions that arise out of postmodernism, the most debilitating to the Christian enterprise is the deconstruction of words. For the postmodernist, words do not convey objective meaning. They emerge out of the subjective mindset of the author and enter into the subjective mindset of the reader. Written texts mean different things to different people, and no singular interpretation of any text is better than any other interpretation. Words are socially constructed and merely tell the story of the writer. They are *signifiers*, and what they signify is different for different people in different cultures at different times.

Because words do not convey objective meaning, the practice of formulating propositional truth claims from words is soundly rejected. Words merely tell a story—a narrative. I have my story, and you have your story. There is a Lutheran story and a Roman Catholic story. There is a Christian story and a Muslim story. No single story is better than any other story. There are no *meta*-narratives—pervasive stories to which all must bow. At the recent Reimagining Conference in the Twin Cities, in which feminists gathered to retell the Christian story, keynote speaker Mary Farrell Bednarowski said, “To ask about someone’s story is theology ... Only when we hear and receive all the stories will we arrive at the truth.”⁹

Christianity is and always has been a religion of the Book. We begin with the understanding that the authors of Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, were seeking to communicate objective reality in the words they employed. On the basis of the meaning of the words, we formulate doctrinal propositions. Objective reality translates into objective truth. It is the task of the theologian to discover that truth, formulate and systematize that truth, and teach that truth to others.

Postmodernists soundly reject that methodology. In their way of thinking, the author is unable to convey objective, absolute truth. The author is merely telling his story based upon his own social construction.¹⁰ Since the words of the text do not convey objective meaning, presenting truth as propositional statements drawn from the text is impossible. All you can do is tell the author’s story and allow the reader of that story to provide his or her own interpretation—which becomes his or her story.

This gives rise to the new method for conducting a postmodern baby-boomer Bible class. It is no longer the task of the exegetically trained pastor to teach the meaning of the text in the form of objective, propositional truth statements. Rather, each individual discovers his or her personal meaning of the text. No one meaning is better than any other meaning. The pastor merely facilitates this pooling of ignorance.¹¹

The Postmodern Religious World

Many suggest that the postmodern philosophy is merely a baby-boomer thing and that this way of thinking, together with leisure suits, flowered shirts, and “Laugh-In,” will pass. Those staging sit-ins on campus 25 years ago are now in the classrooms teaching an irrational philosophy. But be that as it may, even though postmodernism may be a temporary glitch in the societal psyche, it is the prevail-

ing mindset of the culture. Attempting to appeal to the postmodern culture will profoundly change the manner in which we confront people with the Christian message.

In the modern age, world religions and Christian denominations were in competition. The doctrinal truth claims of one group were set against the truth claims of competing groups. Religions or denominations had, so to speak, their own store in the great religious shopping mall. Not only did each proclaim, promote, and describe their particular product to the shoppers, but they also criticized the products offered in the other stores. They honestly believed that their product was better. The goal was to convert the shopper. We in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod spoke of having the *pure Gospel* as opposed to the impure understanding of the Gospel offered by other denominations. We shared that pure Gospel 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.

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 it, try the Pepsi taste test. But when Coke decided to “teach the world to sing” rather than compete with Pepsi, a whole new day in advertising dawned. Postmodern advertising does not place one product over the other. That is mean-spirited. You buy Bud because of frogs and lizards, not because it tastes better than Coors.

This same kinder and gentler commercialism also permeates the postmodern religious shopping mall. All religious doctrinal products are now of equal value. Truth is no longer a matter of life and death. Seeking to impose your superior beliefs upon others is as politically incorrect to the postmodern thinker as seeking to change sexual orientation or impose what you believe are better cultural standards. If people buy your product, it is not because your product is better. Rather, it is because you have the best displays, the cleverest advertising, and the friendliest and happiest sales people. You offer free coffee and have balloons for the kiddies. When people come into your store, they have a good experience.¹²

The Mormons have led the way in demonstrating the postmodern advertisement of religion. Their media blitz promotes the quality of their community of faith rather than the content of their teaching.¹³ They have appealed very successfully to the feelings and emotions of postmodern people.

Should We Accommodate the Culture?

The question before us this morning is a very simple question. *Should we seek to appeal to and accommodate this postmodern culture?* If this is the path we choose to take, we have some major adjustments to make. We must work very hard at changing our image. In the eyes of many today, we are a hard-nosed, power-hungry, conservative assembly of politically incorrect truth-mongers. Of course, if we choose, we can change our image. We can reshape ourselves into a politically correct and culturally relevant organization. The Mormons did it. Why can’t we? We merely have to understand what the culture is seeking and accom-

modate it. This does not require a great deal of wisdom or courage.¹⁴

Postmodernists will attend a church that affords them the best experience—a church they will “like.”¹⁵ Whether or not the church teaches 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 stands little chance of appealing to this postmodern culture. On the other hand, a church offering a warm and safe nonthreatening environment with a friendly, relevant, open-minded pastor who leads an exciting Sunday morning contemporary experience and teaches biblical principles focusing upon marriage, the family, values, and morals will undoubtedly win. Adding fun-filled theme parks and colorful food courts to our facilities will also expand membership.

But the question is, if cultural accommodation becomes our goal, what in the world are we going to do with all our politically incorrect and culturally offensive doctrines and practices? And we have many. We believe in original sin. We say that man, by nature, is spiritually dead and blind. We teach the absolute and exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. We claim to have the right understanding of the Gospel. We acknowledge the reality of eternal punishment in hell. Our confessions condemn a wide variety of heretics. We practice close Communion. We reject the ordination of women and gender-neutral Bible translations. We contend that homosexuality is not a viable alternative lifestyle. In a postmodern culture, all of these positions are offensive and mean-spirited.

The Mormons, by seeking to appeal to the sensitivities of the culture, have been forced to clean up their act by marginalizing their offensive doctrinal elements—including poor Joseph Smith himself.¹⁶ Without such purging, their media blitz would bring people in the front door while their doctrines would push them out the back. If we seek to accommodate the culture, we will have to marginalize those offensive elements of our doctrinal theology that will also push people out the back door.

Some have attempted the old “bait and switch” routine—bring them in with one approach, and after you get them in, tell them the truth. The truth is, what you use to bring them in—the baby-boomer postmodernists—you will have to continue to use to keep them.

Marginalizing Sound Doctrine

Perhaps for some of you it is not a bad idea to marginalize offensive doctrines and adjust offensive practices. Why go to the mat over doctrine? Why not merely emphasize all the joy, peace, hope, and love that we have in Christ and thereby appeal to the sensitive postmodern baby-boomer seekers at the level of their feelings and emotions?

But what does it mean that we have joy, peace, hope, and love in Christ? Why do we have joy? What is the source of peace? How do we get hope? How do we define love? And above all, who in the world is this Christ-person? Did you know that the very popular New Age movement teaches that “Christ” is a psychological term and the “Christ-con-

sciousness” is a part of every human being?¹⁷ Is this what we mean when we say, “There is hope in Christ”? Does this hope dwell latently within our higher Christ-self as some believe? You see, the problem is, without clear doctrinal definitions all our pious platitudes and ingratiating clichés, while appealing to the feelings of people, become open to a wide range of interpretations.

Marginalizing sound doctrine in an age of relativism opens the door to spiritual eclecticism. If truth is to be found in every religious story, what is to hinder people from embracing the religious notions they like and producing their own personalized mix-and-match designer religion?¹⁸ A recent Barna poll indicated that 53 percent of evangelicals believe there is no such thing as absolute truth. New Age gurus like Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, and Betty Eadie do the TV talk show circuits and are written up in the major newsmagazines. People are exposed to their way of thinking about spiritual matters and readily mix reincarnation with the Resurrection and eastern mysticism with the Means of Grace. After all, aren’t all these stories true? As Ms. Bednarowski put it, “Only when we hear and receive all the stories will we finally arrive at truth.”

On a recent CNBC interview Tim Russert asked Don Imus whether or not he was a Christian.

“Sure, I believe Jesus is the Son of God,” Imus responded.

“So, you believe you are going to heaven?” Russert asked.

“Nah,” Imus explained. “I’m into that karma thing.”

If we head down the path of accommodating the postmodern culture by marginalizing doctrine and refraining from engaging in polemics, we should not be surprised if there are people at our Communion tables who are also “into that karma thing,” are invoking their “Christ-consciousness,” and receive the “word of the Lord” by visualizing Jesus as their spirit-guide. The path of cultural accommodation heads down a very slippery slope! When do we put on the brakes so that we leave something for our children and grandchildren that remotely resembles the Lutheranism of our fathers and grandfathers? Is truth as important to us as it was to them? *Is it still a matter of life and death?*

A Vacuum of Truth

Rather than changing our image so that we might accommodate the popular culture, I suggest that we should be prepared to fill the voids and vacuums created by that popular culture. Think about it. Truth is and always has been the anchor of human existence. The great philosophers of the ages relentlessly pursued truth. Luther coined the phrase, “Plato is a friend; Socrates is a friend. But the honor supreme must go to truth.” Apart from truth, we wander aimlessly. We are left with nothing greater than our own ideas. We have no standard against which to measure the meaning of our own existence.¹⁹

The so-called experts on growing a church tell us that we must meet the needs of people. Well, let me ask you this question: If truth is the anchor of human existence and a philosophy permeates our culture with the notion that there is no such thing as absolute truth, *what will become*

the greatest human need? Obviously, it will be the need for truth, the need for transcendence, and the need for something to believe in that is bigger than the self. The Nation of Islam has been able to effectively reach the African-American community because they know what they believe. Louis Farrakhan is most certainly not a wishy-washy, sensitive, baby-boomer, postmodern relativist.

Rather than seeking to accommodate the culture, I believe we should display the same courage recently demonstrated by the Southern Baptist Convention and counter the culture.²⁰ To do that, we as a church body are uniquely positioned. We did not sell out our doctrinal integrity to the modern culture of rationalism. We have refrained from ecumenical relationships that would have compromised doctrinal truth. We have remained a confessional church. We know what we believe and why we believe it. We hopefully still know the difference between Law and Gospel and are able to identify those distortions that muddy the message of pure grace. We have never been ashamed to declare that our Lord Jesus is the only Way, and the only Truth, and the only Life. To remove from our shelves or marginalize those ingredients of our doctrinal theology and practice that identify us as a church committed to unashamedly profess, proclaim, and defend truth is *strategic foolishness*.

Doing biblical evangelism in a postmodern age provides a uniquely fascinating challenge. We have the pure Gospel. Let's understand it and proclaim it. We are stubborn and hard-nosed when it comes to issues of truth. Let's not be ashamed of it. The culture says there is no absolute truth. Do we have the courage to joyfully challenge it? Will we be considered politically incorrect and mean-spirited? Yes, but so what? Why would we want to be popular in an irrational age?²¹ If we are more concerned with being faithful to the truth handed down to us than with being popular among postmodernists, God will most certainly grant us the grace to reach the casualties of this chaotic age!

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Notes

1. Dr. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explains postmodernity: "Modernity has given way to postmodernity, which is simply modernity in its latest guise. Claiming that all notions of truth are socially constructed, the postmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself, a deconstructionist project bent on casting down all religions, philosophical, political, and cultural authorities" (Boice and Sasse, *Here We Stand* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996], p. 61).
2. Gene Edward Veith in *Postmodern Times* echoes the same sentiments. He points out that for postmodernists, truth claims are actually "power plays." He writes: "For the deconstructionists, all truth claims are suspect and are treated as a cover-up for power plays. Reason, objective truth, science, and all 'Western claims to serenely self-aware rationality' are challenged ... Deconstructionism represents a new kind of

relativism, one that is intellectually sophisticated, theoretically grounded, and methodologically rigorous ... 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" (*Postmodern Times* [Crossway Books: Wheaton, IL, 1994], pp. 56–57).

3. David Wells writes: "The right of each individual to his or her own private thoughts and beliefs is held to be both axiomatic and inviolable. So it is that the particularities of evangelical faith—the things that make it *different*—are dissolved. Modern culture grants me absolute freedom to believe whatever I want to believe—so long as I keep those beliefs from infringing on the consciousness or behavior of anyone else, especially on points of controversy" (*God in the Wasteland* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], p. 27).
4. Dr. Mohler writes: "Indeed, in many denominations and churches, notions of orthodoxy and heresy have become 'conceptual emptiness.' The boundaries have vanished. The very possibility of heresy is dismissed in many circles within Protestantism" (*Here We Stand*, p. 61). On my daily radio program, I interviewed an ELCA theologian who had written an excellent article on the subject of justification. When I asked him how the Lutheran understanding of justification differs from the Roman Catholic understanding, he responded, "Well, that's their truth." So while Lutherans have their truth, Roman Catholics have their truth. Even though the propositional statements defining that truth are contradictory, to the postmodern thinker, that makes no difference. Both are true.
5. Christ consciousness: "New Age idea taken from eastern mysticism and Gnosticism that each person possesses the 'divine spark' which we must realize or attain" (William Watson, *A Concise Dictionary of Cults and Religions* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1991], p. 52).
6. Henry Knight writes: "In contrast to modernity, the postmodern world is happily populated by a host of particular claims, with an accompanying diversity of cultures and beliefs. The particularity of Jesus Christ is in itself not problematic to postmodernity. It is the claim that Jesus is of universal redemptive significance that it finds difficult—a 'scandal of universality'" (*A Future for Truth* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997], p. 70).
7. David Koresh and Waco, Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate, Betty Eadie's "Embraced by the Light," Helen Schucman's "Course in Miracles," James Redfield's "The Celestine Prophecy," Elizabeth Clare Prophet and the "Church Triumphant and Universal," Jose Silva and "Mind Control," Deepak Chopra, and Marianne Williamson all appreciate Jesus. The primary guru of the New Age movement, Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, taught that the "Christ archetype" could be activated and encountered via active imagination or visualization. People today choose Jesus to be their spirit-guide. As they visualize him,

- he speaks to them and gives them wisdom and guidance. They therefore claim, "I follow the words of Jesus."
8. The postmodern philosophy is logically untenable. To make the statement "there is no such thing as objective, absolute truth," causes the reasonable person to ask, "Is that statement itself objectively and absolutely true?" If there is no such thing as objective and absolute truth, one must conclude that the statement "there is no such thing as objective and absolute truth" is itself neither objectively nor absolutely true. The statement is self-refuting. Also, it is impossible to communicate the notion that words do not convey objective meaning. In order to do so, one must employ words. Regarding the enthusiasts, Luther wrote: "Just so our enthusiasts are condemning the external Word and yet are not silent themselves but filling the world with prating and writing." In the same way, postmodernists are filling the bookshelves with books written in the very language that they are attempting to deconstruct. If we apply the postmodern notion of the deconstruction of words to the many words written by the postmodernists themselves, they obviously become victims of their own philosophy. They refute themselves. Why would anyone read the words of an author who is suggesting through those very words that words themselves do not convey objective meaning?
 9. The Re-imagining Rebuttal," published by the Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society.
 10. Jim Leffel comments: "Authors, they claim, are social constructs—virtually impersonal, socially constructed 'nodes.' According to postmodernists, authors can't create unique or original works that express their thought or feelings as individuals. They can only restate what is 'already present' in their social reality. This means that there is little value in viewing the author as the one who gives the text its meaning, as though he or she occupies some privileged place in the communication process" (Dennis McCallum, *The Death of Truth* [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996], p. 89).
 11. Sociologists Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens describe the nature of Bible study in successful baby-boomer churches: "These churches profess strong biblical authority yet leave final authority up to individuals without any attempt at achieving agreement or imposing official statements. The pastor gives a perspective on any passage and then invites the members to study, pray, ask for inspiration from the Holy Spirit and decide for themselves" (*Vanishing Boundaries: the Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby-boomers* [Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1994], p. 208).
 12. Dennis McCallum writes: "Today, evangelicals should be concerned not only because the secular world has opted for the centrality of experience and power over and above truth, but because some evangelicals are tempted to do the same! If we think we can offer an experience that will compete effectively with other post-modern religious experiences, we tread ground alien to the New Testament. Paul never argued that Christ could top the mystery religions and other ecstatic cults in terms of religious experience. He offered the truth—Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This was the power of God to which he wanted them exposed" (*The Death of Truth*, p. 239).
 13. Henry Knight writes: "If the resurrection is true, then there will be Christian communities where its impact will be evident, and persons for whom faith in it will have made a significant difference in how they live their lives. For many in a postmodern world, the existence of such communities and lives will be the only evidence they will seek" (*A Future for Truth*, p. 75). Knight's comments are very interesting. The community of faith with the nicest people, the best families with well-behaved children, and cutest puppies will win the day!
 14. In his 1972 book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Methodist minister Dean M. Kelley defined what he termed "weak" churches and "strong" churches. For Kelley, the weak church did not proclaim a singular clear-cut compelling message with a claim to absolute truth. Weak churches offered a variety of interpretations and were not critical of other traditions. They were receptive to divergent views and believed that no one had a monopoly on the truth. Alternatively, strong and, in 1972, growing churches offered compelling, exclusive, and absolute truth concerning the meaning of human existence and sought to integrate the next generation into that truth. Kelley, of course, was writing before the wide proliferation of the experientialism of Pentecostalism and the consumerism of the Church Growth movement. Today, strangely, by Kelley's definitions, weak churches are growing churches.
 15. Gene Veith writes: "Where there are no absolute truths, the intellect gives over to the will. Aesthetic criteria replace rational criteria. Listen to the way people today discuss religion. 'I really like that church,' they will say. Agreeing with that church or believing in its teaching scarcely enters in" (*Postmodern Times*, p. 193).
 16. See Charles and Steven Crane, *Ashamed of Joseph: Mormon Foundations Crumble* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1993).
 17. Oprah Winfrey's personal guru Marianne Williamson puts it this way: "The word *Christ* is a psychological term. No religion has a monopoly on the truth. Christ refers to the common thread of divine love that is the core and essence of every human being ... Focus on Christ means focus on the goodness and power that lie latent within us, in order to invoke them into realization and express ... 'I accept the Christ within,' means 'I accept the beauty within me as who I really am'" (*A Return to Love* [New York: Harper-Collins, 1992], pp. 31–32).
 18. David Wells writes: "This generation is in the market for religious goods, and it is only to be expected that

- one person's purchase will be different from another person's, because every person is different, with special needs. In the fevered quest for individual fulfillment, commonality of belief is brushed aside as an irrelevance, if not an impossibility. The common need for religious experience of some sort is acknowledged, but no restrictions are placed on the sort of experience that will fill the bill for any given individual. Thus do we welcome the personalized, designer religion of the 1990s" (*God in the Wasteland*, p. 100).
19. In their soon-to-be-released book, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), Frank Beckwith and Greg Koukl ask the question: "What kind of world would it be if relativism were true? It would be a world in which nothing is wrong—nothing is considered evil or good, nothing is worthy of praise or blame. It would be a world in which justice and fairness are meaningless concepts, in which there would be no accountability, no possibility of moral improvement, and no moral discourse."
 20. In a 1967 work, Peter Berger outlined the church's two alternatives in dealing with a pluralistic culture. He wrote, "The pluralistic situation presents the religious institutions with two ideal-typical options. They can either accommodate themselves to the situation, play the pluralistic game of religious free enterprise, and come to terms as best they can with the plausibility problem by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands. Or they can refuse to accommodate themselves, entrench themselves behind whatever socio-religious structures they can maintain or construct, and continue to confess the old objectives as much as possible as if nothing had happened" (quoted in *Vanishing Boundaries*, p. 206). There is a third option—positioning ourselves to counter the culture. The "old objectives," or the religion of the 50s, created an uninformed laity, a historic liturgy devoid of meaning, and doctrines removed from life. A counter-cultural response to postmodernism demands a renewed emphasis upon catechesis so that our people no longer define truth as the possession of the church's guardians of doctrinal integrity but as living and relevant expressions of a relationship with a grace-giving God.
 21. For an interesting article on the relationship between the church and the culture, see "Deathly Evangelism" by ELCA pastor Ronald Marshall at <http://users.aol.com/SemperRef>.
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