

A Faithful Church in a Changing World

**Presented by Jack Heppner
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Preamble:** The reason I publish these two addresses I gave at the close of the 20th century is that I think they describe for my readers some of the basic orientation underlying much of my writing in the past number of years. While I might change some things if I were to make similar presentations in 2006, for the most part they remain the ground on which I travel – the backdrop against which I do much of my reflection these days. Some of my readers were present when I gave these addresses. Some may have read them on the EMMC web site. For others they will be new. Perhaps we can begin a dialogue around what I said in the 20th century to see if it connects to where we find ourselves today in the 21st century. **Jack Heppner, July, 2006

First Address...

In Times Like These: Change as a Way of Life

When I was a kid...

When I was a kid - we had to work on the farm - clean out the barn - milk cows by hand. We had no telephone. We got hydro when I was three. I got a monthly allowance of 25 cents. A Pepsi cost 7 cents, a chocolate bar 10. Nobody even had heard of a fax machine, let alone a computer. Uncle Bill got a TV and we spent our family gatherings watching Leave it to Beaver and Little House on the Prairie. Runners cost \$2.95 - Nikes had not yet been conceived. Going bowling was a sin and "What would you do if Jesus found you in a movie theatre when he returns?"

Now when my dad was a kid... They worked the fields with horses and stoked all the grain by hand. A good wage was 25 cents a day plus meals and a bed. Houses were heated with wood or coal. There was a Great Depression - and he road railway cars looking for work He told me how he really got hungry once and how a farmer gave him a meal when he saw the tear in his eye. And when he got bigger his first car was a Whippet and he had to go work for the English folks at Roland and give most of his money home.

Okay, Okay already! That was then. We live now! We are ready to enter the 21st century, man! When are you going to upgrade your ancient Pentium 75? Its old as the hills. And when are you going to chuck that XT 80-88 Mom still uses? What do you mean that sneakers and jeans don't go with a white shirt and a tie? What's wrong with holes in my pants at the knee. I think that's cool! So you can't hear the words to my music - neither can you hear the signal light clicker anymore in the car! When are you getting a hearing aid? Why should I take a history course? They'll expect me to read about stuff all the way

back to the 1960s! What does the past have to do with the future? Can I take Chicken Soup for the Soul to Sunday School instead of my Bible?

You know what? My High School teacher expects me to write a three-page paper that has a thesis and hangs together from beginning to end! He says you can't just splatter information on the page - it has to be coherent! Why should I read *Knowing God*, by J.I. Packer? Do you know how old he is? You would really have to think to wade through that one. I hear that's straight theology, man - getting your facts straight. Why is that so important? Maybe that's important for your generation. By the way, did you know that *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby is outselling *Knowing God*? Which is more important anyway - Getting your facts straight or having an experience of God in my life?

So what has happened? Hasn't every generation experienced a gap with its young? Can't we just wait a while until they grow up and then they'll come around to our experienced point of view? Just relax and things will get back to normal soon enough, won't they? Is there really anything unique about the changes taking place in our time? Are we making too much of the end of the second millennium?

How do we get a handle on the present time? In Romans 13:11 Paul uses the phrase, understanding the present time... After exhorting the Romans to commitment and love in chapter 12, and submission and love in chapter 13, he says, ***And do this, understanding the present time*** - referring specifically to the fact that our salvation is nearer now than you think. But that was nearly 2000 years ago. We live in 1999... The present time...? Ah yes! The present time...!

So What Is Going On?

There has been a lot of froth coming from certain quarters of Christendom about Y2K and the end of the world. I personally do not believe that the year 2000 is really that significant on God's calendar. For us to join Van Impe and his kin in proclaiming Armageddon on the one hand and frantically focusing on personal survival on the other, seems to me to be more a lack of faith in God than an act of faithfulness. God has his own calendar that is not likely linked to our numbering system.

Yet from a human point of view, we do well to ask ourselves where we are going at a time such as this. A hundredth, or a thousandth birthday party is cause for reflection, after all! What are we to say at such a juncture in history?

We could say that, "Yes, society may well be changing, but the church remains the same. You see, my God is the same, yesterday, today and forever - and so is my church!"

We are not totally unfamiliar with this approach. And there is some comfort in this approach. "I may wrestle with changes all around me all week, but when I go to church I

want to be reassured that at the core of my being nothing has changed. God and my faith are invincible, and we can withstand the pressures for change!"

But, if we are honest, we will have to admit that we are affected by the world in which we live. We adapt to modern technology, and technology changes the way we do things and think about things. Tell me that cars, planes, phones, television, computers, fertilizer and commodity prices have not affected you profoundly - and keep a straight face all the while. The winds of the modern spirit blow across our land. They eddy and swirl around us, kicking up the dust and, sometimes even blinding us. And yes, the world in which we live has a way of affecting the way we think about our faith. A quick survey of history, with 20/20 hindsight, illustrates that all too well.

The problem is that Christ does not call us to isolate ourselves from the world, but to live in the world, as redeemed participants within the human race – with our feet on the ground. Not just living above the world, as the old gospel song suggests, but being salt and light in the midst of it.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name - so they may be one as we are one... They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth – your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17).

Why this somewhat anguished prayer of Jesus – which he is still praying eternally to the Father – even today? Because he is aware of the tantalizing temptations we face as we encounter the world around us. And because he is aware of the difficulty and complexity of living in the world as truly sanctified followers of the way.

So what is there for us to do except to pray along with Christ to be protected? Well, we could simply put on the brakes and say, *No more change from here on!* But what if our present state of affairs is already tainted by unbiblical thought patterns and practices which we have picked up from the world around us? Then, if we want to be faithful in our changing world, we may need to stop in our tracks, re-evaluate our position, and re-direct our steps. Then just putting on the brakes may be an act of capitulation to the world.

So there is no ease in Zion as long as we are in this world. Every generation of believers will need to wrestle with themselves and the world around them – yes, even agonize. And for this battle we do have the rock solid foundation of the Scriptures and the presence of the Spirit of whom Jesus said, ***But when he, the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.***

Brothers and sisters, we need guidance, and the Spirit of Truth is standing ready to guide us. Are we in a frame of mind to be guided?

Understanding the Crisis of Post-Modernism

So what is it about our world that is so unique? And why must we be alert and ready to discern in the Spirit as to how the church should face new realities? In short, what the culture watchers among us are saying – and the literature on this subject on Christian and non-Christian presses is multiplying rapidly – is that the modern age is crumbling around us. Some define this age as beginning with Columbus in 1492 and ending at the 500th anniversary of his discovery of America in 1992. Others are defining it more narrowly as beginning with the fall of the Bastille during the French Revolution of 1789 and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. In any case, the modern era is coming to a close.

At the heart of the modern era was an optimistic mood that said that with exploration, scientific discoveries, education, reason, and the good will of people, we could create a new world – a utopia if you will. There was also a belief in the scientific method as the way to discover truth. Only believe that which you can observe to be true. If you want to know something about anything, break it apart into its smallest components, analyze it, put it back together. Experiment, observe – and you will know. Rationalism, not revelation, is our method of knowing truth. Thirdly, modernism declared that man was the center of the world. The highest value in the world is the worth of the individual. Human autonomy and individualism undergirded the modern era. And finally, it was asserted that as more and more discoveries were made, religion would be needed less and less. When Lenin said that religion is the opiate of the people, he was not just repeating a communist doctrine, he was articulating the spirit of modernism, although in the West it could never be said so blatantly.

And all this is coming to an end! So say many sincere culture watchers, evangelical Christians included. They are telling us that what we are experiencing is more than a blip on the screen – more than a normal inter-generational dissonance. They are saying that we will all be affected profoundly by the changes, and that we will need to rethink our faith positions in this new world – at least if we hope to connect with it in a meaningful way.

Robert Webber of Wheaton College, for example, notes, "We are in the midst of huge changes in science, philosophy and communication theory. If these are as far reaching as they seem, we are in a period of history akin to the rise of the Reformation." And Rodney Clapp, Senior Editor of IVP, would add to that "...akin to the fourth century changes that happened under Constantine when the church and state were first blended together."

Ravi Zacharias, world renowned evangelical apologist, agrees, and notes what the modern spirit has done to our age. "Surrounded by vociferous and confident secular theories on life's purpose and destiny, and becoming increasingly aware of radically different world-views from its own, there is a restlessness within and a frenetic search for some new idea that will assuage its impoverished spirit." And to these voices could be added dozens more, including Richard Middleton, Brian Walsh, Stanley Grenz, Millard Erickson, Michael King – to name a few.

The message is both clear and confusing at the same time. It is clear that the world is undergoing massive changes on a scale and speed unthinkable in past generations. The confusing part is that society, and the church within it, is scrambling to find its bearings in a stormy sea that is tossing our little vessels hither and yon.

The Umpire Call

One way of illustrating how things are changing around us is to tell the old story of three umpires discussing their vocation over a beer after a ball game. *I calls 'em as they are!* says the first umpire. *I calls 'em as I sees 'em*, says the second. *Well*, says the third, *they ain't nothin' till I calls 'em*.

I calls 'em as they are, represents a pre-modern worldview. Some things just are – no matter what we think of them. No matter if nobody saw it, it still WAS a strike! Truth is! If you don't accept the truth, that is your problem. Truth doesn't change because you don't like it, or don't believe it. God is. The Bible can be trusted. I can know its meaning without a doubt. This was the classical view before the age of reasoning swamped us.

I calls them as I sees 'em, depicts the modern spirit. Here here is a little more modesty along with less confidence. I could be wrong in my judgement, but in my view it is a strike. Video cameras might prove me wrong, but this is what I see. So even if it really was a ball, if the ump calls a strike, that's the way it goes down in history. You still believe in reality, but you know there are different perspectives on it. We will keep improving our techniques so we can be more sure. We will experiment and learn and develop and the game of life will improve evermore until we reach baseball utopia. And since God can not be proven scientifically, and since we can explain more and more of our world using logic and reason, and since I can't see God, if he does exist, he will not have room at the center of our world. You see, *I calls 'em as I sees 'em*.

They ain't nothin' till I calls 'em, represents a disillusioned modernism, sometimes referred to as post-modernism. You think you know, don't you guys? Or at least you think you can know if you work at it. But that is arrogance. To think that there is a reality out there that you can name and be right about it! Ha! Reality is what I make it out to be. If I call it a strike it will be a strike for me. If you call it a ball it will be a ball for you. And we are both right. It depends on how you see it and what you make of it. Without me, there is nothing – no truth. I create my own world. Maybe there is a god. If you say so, then there is for you. If I say there isn't, then there isn't, for me. The text of the Bible, or any literature, means what I get out of it. There is no such a thing as pure communication.

At the end of the modern era, secularism has indeed become a religion without a god - at least a God who can be known personally. God has been squeezed to the periphery. As we have become more self-sufficient, we have in our culture thought that we could build our own utopia. But when we became godless, we also became purposeless, creating a vacuum at the heart of the human experience – a vacuum that will be filled with something. And postmodernism is an attempt at filling that vacuum.

The Tower of Babel

Another way of getting a handle on where we are at is to re-read the story of the Tower of Babel in light of the present realities. In their profound work, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, Middleton and Walsh suggest this story, found in Genesis 11:1-9, describes precisely where modern humankind finds itself.

The people of that day dreamed of great heights with the sky being the limit! This certainly has been the dream of modernity. They dreamed of being united and living in prosperity. This too has been the dream of our world – to build a world of peace based on our scientific progress and educational insight. But just when their objective seemed to be in sight, the whole thing came crashing down around them with its attendant confusion, chaos and scattering. "And similarly," say Middleton and Walsh, "the crumbling tower of modernity is leaving its people in a state of disarray."

They describe the Modern Tower of Babel as a four-story building.

The First Floor

The 17th century – is the ground floor. It is the floor of Science. It is the world inaugurated by Francis Bacon and his scientific method for discovering truth – believe nothing until it can be proven to the human senses. Doubt is the foundation of discovery of truth.

The Second Floor

The 18th century – is the floor of Technology. The Industrial Revolution, with its mass production, changed the way of life for the masses. It was also known as the age of enlightenment in which we were finally able to rid ourselves of past superstitions.

The Third Floor

The 19th century – is the floor of the Market Economy. The vision was that capitalism and the profit motive would create a new fair distribution of wealth and unlimited economic growth. During this century the utopian dream grew – a united, industrialized world at peace, thanks to human ingenuity and effort. The Crystal Palace Exhibition at Hyde Park in London in 1851 brought together all the inventions that modern technology could muster. Nothing like it had happened before! In his public speech at that event, Prince Albert said: "Nobody, who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of our present era, will doubt for a moment that we are living in a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end to which indeed all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind."

It is interesting to note that such optimism fueled the great missionary century – the 1800s – in which the majority of missionaries subscribed to a postmillennialism that believed that once the whole world was Christianized and civilized Christ would return to set up his millennial kingdom. Note the words of the optimistic missionary song of the era.

Waft, waft ye winds his story
 And you ye waters roll,
 Till like a sea of glory,
 It spreads from pole to pole:
 Till o'er our ransomed nature,
 The Lamb for sinners slain,
 Redeemer, King, Creator,
 In bliss returns to reign.

Christ would return to a world that was christianized, civilized and waiting to receive him with open arms. Great optimism!

The Fourth Floor

The 20th century – opened on a wave of hope and optimism carried over from the 19th century. But woe to those who trust in fragile gods – who build towers based on human autonomy. It would soon become evident that the entire building was rotten from the foundation up. Say Middleton and Walsh, “As the engine of progress begins to run out of steam and Western confidence begins to wane, the building project of modernity has come to a grinding halt, prematurely, right in the middle of the fourth-floor construction. But the entire fourth floor – the 20th century – has in fact been plagued by shoddy workmanship. For those with eyes to see the building never did match the romanticized blueprint.” (23)

First came the Great War to end all wars and allow the construction of the great century to continue. Then the Depression with its attendant suffering. Then the Second World War. Then the Cold War. Then Vietnam, student protests, global refugees, overpopulation, starvation, and more wars. Now pollution, global warming, and the rise of tribalism such as we see in the Balkans.

As we enter the 21st century the dream has died! Optimism has been replaced with a rampant pessimism. The vision that science could really better the world has vanished. The pursuit of individualism has left millions standing cold and naked in the biting winds howling through the wreckage of the fourth floor of the modern edifice. And everywhere you look there is a tremendous search in progress for something more.

Modernism and Faith

I will not pretend that I fully comprehend the magnitude of the changes taking place among us and in our world. I do know, however, that the changes are massive and pervasive, and that the foundations on which the modern world is built are crumbling around us. But more than that, I know that the modern world has affected the way we think about God, and faith and our relationship to God.

Lest you get too smug by thinking that I must be talking about those “liberals” who have caved in to culture, I want to suggest that in many respects the conservatives of North

America, including and especially so, perhaps, the fundamentalists of the past century, have defined their identity largely in terms of the modern spirit that is now crumbling around us. Its characteristic triumphalism, rationalism, and individualism, which it absorbed from its cultural milieu, not from the Bible, may in fact have served to hasten the secularism that now is sweeping over our lands – a secularism that is leaving society with emptiness, restlessness and loneliness. Permit me to illustrate the effect of modernism on faith in North America.

Example 1: The Problem of the Forgotten Middle

Paul Hiebert discusses the problem of the forgotten middle, as he names it, at length. The classical view was that God was active in and through his creation as well as in supernatural ways. You could see him active in nature, in flowers, in babies, in weather, in the breath you breathed. As science began explaining things in scientific terms, God was gradually pushed back to his heaven. Christians gradually began accepting this view of things, sometimes known as dualism. God is in heaven which is the seat of supernatural activity. For the most part, however, our lives are surrounded by things that we now understand scientifically. The world is running according to God's laws, perhaps, but we don't see God at work as we once did.

What effect did this new view of reality have on Christians? Those of a more liberal mindset began to explain miracles in naturalistic terms. "Once we understand how nature really works," they reasoned, "we will come to see that what we thought was supernatural was in fact simply a natural occurrence which we formerly had relegated to miracle." There arose a pervasive skepticism about any reality other than that controlled by laws of nature.

Those of a more conservative bent drew a sharp line between evangelism and social action – saving souls for heaven, but wondering about the benefit of helping people with skin on.

And for millions of Christians, the only real evidence for God happened when he zapped across that forgotten middle – from his home in heaven – to do a miracle in the natural world. When the miracles were not present, there was no evidence for God. This anti-biblical dualism (really a repeat of the Gnostic heresy of the first few centuries), fueled by the spirit of our age, has created enormous problems for Christendom.

As we move into the 21st century, we will need a biblical theology of holism in which we see God at work in every facet of his created world.

Example 2: A Rationalistic Approach to Scriptures

In the shadow of rationalism in our culture, Christians have frequently turned the Bible into a science text book. We have taken the precious, living Word of God and subjected it to scientific analysis, expecting of it the mathematical accuracy of a logarithm guide book – a kind of rigor unheard of in biblical times – proving the veracity of the Bible with a calculator! Then, we have frequently used the Bible as a dictionary to proof-text our way into all kinds of philosophical corners. Do you want to know what God is like – study this

word, that phrase, this verse, that verse – and piece together a picture in the true spirit of western philosophy.

Somewhere along the way we have forgotten that the Bible is really a *story* in which God moves with his people and reveals himself along the way. Modernism has had little use for stories – only philosophical truth stated propositionally. But the Bible is more than a billion micro-bytes that can be manipulated into any contour of one's liking.

As we move beyond modernism, we will need a view of the Bible that allows for the centrality of story if we are to connect with the postmodern world.

Example 3: Individualism

Perhaps here we have adapted most fully to modernism in our western churches. A major building block of modernism is the autonomous individual. Every individual has his or her own rights guaranteed by the constitution of the land. Whether one looks at so-called Liberals or Conservatives within North America, this is a predominant characteristic. They may fight each other above the table but under the table they are holding hands on this one.

And here we are guilty! Much of revivalism as we have experienced it in our story is a concession to the individualistic spirit. Check the gospel songs we love so much. "My God and I walk in the field together..." We have sometimes given way to the view of being singular crusaders in the world with cell phones for direct instructions from heaven, with only a passing interest in the welfare of the church. The English language has not helped us with the word *you* being the same, whether singular or plural.

If we are going to connect to the post-modern world we will need to rediscover a focus on the community – the body of Christ.

Example 4: Triumphalism

The triumphalistic spirit of the modern age has often rubbed off on Christians. Just give us a bit of time –we can handle this – no problem. This shows up in a variety of ways. Giving easy and glib answers to complicated questions or withdrawing from the hard issues that face our world. Just pray and your problems will be solved. If you die of starvation, at least you'll go to heaven – if you accept Jesus. If you've been abused, just pray this prayer and all will be well. Some have even gone so far as to say that in faith you are free from all calamity, sickness, or accident – that is if you have enough faith.

If we are to touch the post-modern world we will need a theology that allows us to sit among the broken shards of post-modernism with a humility that waits on God and admits to struggle and agony around the questions that don't yield easy answers. We will need to learn how to lament with David in the Psalms and be moved by injustice and brokenness that can not easily be fixed.

The 21st Century - Similar to the 1st century

I close on a positive note. Yes, it is a strange new world we are entering as we step across the millennial boundary. But more and more, we are beginning to recognize that the world we are entering into has strange parallels to the world that the early Christians lived in. A world in which Christians did not have political or economic power. A pluralistic world in which Christianity was but one of the players. A world in which conversion and baptism had profound ramifications. A world in which the church witnessed to a largely pagan world out of its brokenness and suffering. Could it be that God is preparing us for a new outpouring of a Spirit-led dynamic, similar to that experienced by the early church, which turned its world upside down? I kind of think so.

Second Address...

Faithfulness on the Move

This morning we want to explore some of the options open to us as a church as we slip over into the third millennium, as modernism stumbles to its faltering conclusion on its icy fourth floor of its own Tower of Babel, and as the post-modern spirit begins to capture the hearts and minds of our young people.

What is a faithful response? How can we move beyond Y2K into a faithful future?

Capitulation

Capitulation to the Postmodern Spirit is one option. We'll just do whatever it takes to feel at home in this new world. We will dance to whatever tune the piper plays. After all, has Christianity not adapted to hundreds of new situations throughout history. Let it flex here as well.

Henry Nouwen tells the story that illustrates this approach well. Nouwen was a chaplain on a Holland-America cruise liner. He stood one day on the bridge of a Dutch ship mucking its way through a thick fog into the port of Rotterdam. The fog was so thick, in fact, that the steersman could not even see the bow of the ship. The captain, carefully listening to a radar station operator who was explaining his position between other ships, walked nervously up and down the bridge.

In the process of his nervous pacing, the captain collided with this ship's chaplain. Adrift in anxiety as well as fog, the captain cursed the chaplain and told him to stay out of the way. "But," says Nouwen, "when I was ready to run away, filled with feelings of incompetence and guilt, he came back and said: Why don't you just stay around. This might be the only time I really need you."

In reflecting on this experience, Nouwen compares it to the place of the church in society today. "There was a time, not too long ago, when we felt like captains running our own ships, with a great sense of power and self-confidence. Now we are standing in the way. That is our lonely position: We are powerless, on the side... not taken very seriously when the weather is fine."

For most of the Christian Era it has been fashionable for the church to be a sponsor of western civilization. And even in the modern era, while the underpinnings of a religious world view were being eroded, the western world still invited the church to be its chaplain – to bless its institutions, its efforts, its policies, its bullets, its people and its programs. But in a turn of events that we might have foreseen, just as we are reaching the end of the modern experiment, we are being told that our sponsorship is no longer needed or wanted. Oh, you can hang around just in case we get into a bind – then we'll call on you for a song and a prayer. But when the weather is fair, please stay out of the way.

However to capitulate to the agenda of the post-modern world would be repeat some of the same errors we have made in the modern world. In that case we would simply embrace the new world, with its radical pluralism, where everyone's story is of equal worth and there is no larger story into which they fit. We would accept the view that objective reality does not exist except in the experience of individuals. We would just ooze gently into this new world, without discernment, accepting the good along with the bad – as has so often been the case in the modern era!

But such an unthinking adaptation does not bode well for the question of faithfulness beyond Y2K. It doesn't take the present crisis seriously. Its laissez-faire approach will lead to a sentimental capitulation. We will preside at weddings and funerals, perhaps, which seem vaguely fitting to have a religious air about them. We would have nothing really distinctive to offer or be. It would, in effect, be admitting that Christianity has really nothing to offer but to politely stay out of the way as the ship makes its way through the dense fog of post-modernism.

I am reminded of the story of the Children of Israel in their new promised land. God had a mission in mind for his people –to establish his people in the land and from there to bring blessing to all the nations of the world. But the Israelites became fascinated with the values of the society around them. At first the pagan practices looked awful to them. Can you imagine boiling a kid in its mother's milk? Or sacrificing your children to the fire? Or practicing ritual prostitution? But as they got used to their post-desert world, they decided it would really be better to become like these nations.

How are we going to bear witness to Yahweh's glory among the nations if we don't speak their language and use their symbols? We need a king like the rest of the nations...and a temple – so that when they come to us we are on the same wave length. And you know the rest of the story. Dancing to the piper's tune is not a faithful option.

Unthinking capitulation does not lead to faithfulness. As a matter of fact, it usually leads to unfaithfulness – as it has done in the modern era.

Entrenchment

Entrenchment is a second option as we respond to the changing world around us. Pretend that nothing has changed. Give me that old-time religion. It was good for Paul and Silas, and my grandparents, and its good enough for me. After all, my God is the same – yesterday, today and forever. I will stick with what I know, what feels right, how I perceive truth. I will repeat the formulas I have been taught. That means carrying on with our agenda and our programs as we know have them until Jesus comes. I will dig in my heels. I know what the Bible teaches. I know what I want. Now go away and don't ask me to change anything. I don't want to be disturbed!

This approach will be more difficult than capitulation – our first option – because some of the traditional patterns and practices will increasingly put us out of touch with the emerging generation. The dissonance will continue to grow and we may find ourselves shouting into the wind with no one to listen.

But, there are other problems with this approach as well. What if the language we speak no longer communicates? What if, as many are now saying, the faith of our past is mixed up with American ideals and we really don't know how to separate them? What if our faith has been colored by rationalism, individualism, and triumphalism – ideals that are rooted in modernism but are now being rejected even by secular society? Will we hang on to such unbiblical visions even though our pagan neighbors have already discovered them to be lacking in integrity and hope?

Now I must hasten to interject here that I am not suggesting that all our parents have believed and practiced, or indeed all we believe and practice today, has been corrupted – that there is no integrity left. Most of God's people are doing their best to live out their faith as they understand it. They are sincere and committed to doing what God wants them to do. And the Spirit has frequently illumined our path one step at a time. But if we can take any lessons from history at all, and indeed specifically from the story of God's people in the Bible, we must admit that the context in which God's people lived affected them profoundly. Much of the Scripture is the story of how God's people struggled to make corrections to patterns and practices which they had picked up from their environment which did not line up with God's vision for his people.

I am not calling for a rejection of the faith once delivered to us. I am suggesting, however, that at this crisis point in history we need to come humbly before God, recognizing our tendency to flirt with idolatry. And we need to ask God to give us a biblical vision that will be both faithful and strike at the heart of the present generation. We need to repent of the attitude that just digs in heels and longingly looks back to the little brown church in the wildwood with the hope that we could return to that era once more. We need our precious faith to be lived out in a way that will connect with the real world around us.

Yes there will be those who will continue to suppose that through legislation and political clout they will be able to make our nations "Christian" once again – to line up our country's laws with God's laws, and force non-Christians to act like Christians. In some communities, and in some regions perhaps, this will still work for a little while. But realistically speaking Christians will not be in control of the world in the 21st century. (Perhaps it was a faulty dream to start with, beginning way back in the 4th century.) We will no longer be able to assume that the laws of the land will favor Christian morals and values. We will not be able to call in the law to back up our views of how life should be.

Entrenchment is as old as the hills. Throughout biblical history we have examples of people who could not for the life of them understand that some things had changed – that there was new agenda on God's program. That there were changes needed to meet the needs of the hour. I think of the Judaizers in Paul's day. These were not godless people bent on destroying God's work. These were not dyed-in-the-wool Jews who could not accept Jesus as the Messiah. These were people like you and me who had responded to Christ. Probably many of them were among the 3000 converted at Pentecost. They knew how God had worked in the past through the people of Israel. And they did accept the new thing God was doing in Christ.

But for the life of them they could not see how some of the old patterns needed to be left behind. Now was the time of the Gentiles. God was moving his agenda forward and some of the old ways would have to be left behind. Paul had discerned in the Spirit that the new frontier on God's agenda required some major shifting of paradigms. Indeed, *that There is (in the new era) neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). The time had come to bring to fruition God's vision for the nations which he had already revealed to Abraham. And this created a great tension that required a major conference, not dissimilar to an EMMC convention, to strike a new course in a new world (Acts 15).

Entrenchment may be the knee-jerk reaction of many of us to the pressures of change that the post-modern world is bringing upon us. But it will not take us into a dynamic future. Like capitulation, entrenchment is not really a faithful option for God's people at the beginning of the 21st century. But there is a third option.

A Renewed Encounter

A renewed encounter with the historic Christian faith and the emerging post-modern world is really the only faithful option open to us as we move into the next millennium. By this I mean that we must go back to our foundations – to re-read the Scriptures with new glasses as we take seriously the stinging critique that postmodernists bring to the modern world we know and love so much.

At some point in the past the Lord has used the mouth of a donkey to convey directions. Today, I believe, he is using the postmodernists to awaken us to some long lost truths that, if rediscovered, could revolutionize our faith experience and bring renewal the likes

of which this generation has not seen. So we are flung back on the Word of God and onto our knees as we seek the voice of the Spirit in our troubled times.

Yes, we will be somewhat cautious, because we do not sympathize with some major components of the emerging worldview. We will reject the notion that there is no objective truth. In that case we would have to give up the historic Jesus of the Bible and his death, resurrection and ascension. Even the notion of a personal God who is real.

We will reject the notion that there is no larger story to which our personal stories can be linked - the idea that truth is just a grand collection of many diverging stories. And we will reject the notion that a text can mean anything you want it to mean, as long as it makes sense to you. Communication of truth is a possibility, contrary to postmodernist views. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory...

Withstanding these tenets of postmodernism will be more difficult than we imagine today. This view has already permeated much of the world of educational literature – especially poetry. The text means what you think it means. It has a life of its own, detached from the original author. It may even mean that we will have to review some of our Bible study methods. (The approach that asks each person in the circle to say what verse one means to him or her and then moving on to verse two to do the same thing, is quite postmodern, even though it has its roots in the pietistic movement. It leaves the impression that any number of interpretations of that text are valid, even though they might conflict with each other.) No, we will not swallow the new hermeneutic – hook, line and sinker.

On the other hand, if we will listen carefully to the voices coming to us from the future, we will recognize a number of challenges that resonate with some profound themes emerging from the biblical text. Themes, which surprisingly enough, frequently echo biblical truths that evangelical Anabaptists have held to for five centuries.

While this awakening in the wider evangelical world has been somewhat slow in coming, it is reaching crescendo proportions in evangelical literature today. Over and over, these past months, as I have read around this subject, I have come across phrases something like this, "This notion – usually a reference to a concession to modernism – has been standard fare for most evangelicals, except of course for the Anabaptists who recognized its fallacy half a millennium ago!" I assure you that those statements are not mine - they come from the computers of many respected evangelical thinkers and writers today.

So we are living in an awesome age. Secularists themselves have ripped modernism to shreds. In the vacuum that is left there is a tremendous search for meaning and wholeness, mystery and story, wisdom and community, and ultimately God. And evangelical apologists, in their agonized search for a way to connect and communicate with this changing world have discovered biblical truths that have been a part of our Anabaptist heritage for centuries – although not always understood nor practiced fully.

If ever there was an opportunity to bear witness to a relevant theology, it is today. Many religious thinkers who formerly shunned Anabaptism, are asking us to bear witness to our faith perspective in these troubling times. A revitalized Anabaptist theology bears much potential for connecting with the generation emerging after Y2K is over with.

Relevant and Faithful Theology for the 21st Century

So, what is the shape of the theology that has potential for taking Christendom into the next millennium with power and relevance? Permit me to sketch the vision briefly as it is emerging on the horizon of Christian consciousness.

Story will become increasingly important. We will begin to read the Bible once more as a story of God at work through his people. At the end of the modern era our kids don't know Bible stories any more. Ask Bible College professors. Young people know about movies, but not Bible stories. Too long have we focused on propositional truth to the exclusion of story.

People in the emerging generation like to tell their stories, and hear the stories of others. And they are open to hear you tell your story – to give your testimony – in the lingo of a generation ago. And with a renewed interest in story will come a new focus on **biblical theology** – seeing truth emerge from the encounter of God with his people. We will rely less on purely propositional statements, especially as they are framed by western philosophical thought. And coming to faith in Christ will be thought of less in terms of accepting a set of statements as divine truth, and more in terms of joining in with the story of God's people and God's way in the world.

Along this line also, we will be asked to re-read the story of the church during the past two millennia. The standard evangelical version of history has been to see 313 AD as the triumph of the church – when the state recognized and began holding hands with the church. This interpretation is having a hard time these days. The criticism being leveled against it these days by postmodernists is that when the church gained political power, it initiated a history bathed in blood and violence in the name of God. And it is a tragic story indeed. The tribes of Europe Christianized by the sword. Convert or die! The Crusades, the countless religious wars, and even the anomaly of Hitler's henchmen wearing the buckle inscribed with "Gott Mit Uns". How, say the postmodernists, can you commend that kind of a story to us! Do you want us to continue that story? Forget it.

Do you get the point. Within our Anabaptist heritage we have said for 500 years that that is a false story. It does not represent the true way of God in the world. There is a way of peace. There is another way to tell the story. Could it be that hearing the story from a different angle will open the hearts and minds of postmodernists to begin believing in the larger story once again? I think it has great potential.

Wisdom will be the watchword in the future instead of knowledge. Now I am not opposed to knowledge. Much of the knowledge that has come out of the Enlightenment is

good and worthy of praise. We all benefit greatly every day because of the growth in knowledge that has taken place. But our explosion of knowledge has created an overload for many people. Access to internet allows you to find out more facts about any subject in the world by chasing a mouse across a table than our fathers could ever have dreamed of. And there is a new realization that the accumulation of knowledge has little merit if it is not morphed into wisdom or the spiritual life of the one who has this knowledge. Knowledge is good only when it facilitates good results. So a relevant gospel must emphasize the relevance of faith for every dimension of life.

This may not be news to you. But historically, evangelicalism has not allowed the gospel of Christ to permeate every facet of the life of its adherents. It was not always appropriate to ask whether Jesus would do such and such. Some activities in civil and national life must not be judged by the Jesus ethic, it has been said. Again postmodernists are saying that such dualism does not make sense. If you want to follow Jesus, then follow him. Don't compartmentalize your life and join him in his story when it suits you.

What an opportunity to bear witness to our faith. Yes, we accept Jesus for all of life, no matter what the cost. The story of Jesus makes sense to us. Jesus is the fullest revelation of God with respect to how he expects us to live in this world. We can focus our lives on spirituality and healing instead of participating in the cycle of violence that has no end. So we will focus on wisdom, applying knowledge to life in practical ways, as we step across the threshold of a new millennium.

Note the words of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 2:6-9. *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*

On another front, **mystery** will be allowed alongside of rationalism as we move into the future. The modern age was characterized by rationalism. We will not become anti-intellectual, as though to say that good solid reasoning is bad in and of itself. Yet the criticism of modernism is that we have made rationalism into an idol. We are intellectual beings, but we are more than "rational animals" as Aristotle figured it.

There is more to life than figuring things out with our brains. We must allow room for mystery! We will not be irrational, but we will allow for the mysterious work of the Spirit. We will continue to think clearly, but we will be open to the unexpected, the miracle. Who can explain how forgiveness work – or grace, or reconciliation, or love or divine power flowing through us. While mysteries were largely foreign to modernists, postmodernists are open to embrace them.

For some of us who are so steeped in rationalism, this will be a hard pill to swallow. But swallow it we must if we want to connect beyond Y2K.

Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens. What can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave. What can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea. Job 11:7-9

And beyond mystery we will focus in the future more on **community**. We will present a post-individualistic gospel, as Stanley Grenz, the Baptist theologian from William Carey College in Vancouver says.

There are some dimensions of individualism that we appreciate. Every person is important to God. Every person is accountable to God. Every person deserves to be loved and cared for. But unfortunately the negative effects of the spirit of individualism has permeated much of church life in North America. It has not helped that the poor English language only has one word for the singular and plural *you*. In any case we are bombarded every day with a gospel of individualism that has little regard for the community of faith – the church.

There is in the postmodern world a tremendous loneliness – the end result of the modern love affair with individualism - and a hunger for a place to belong, to be part of community. Yes, we will continue to uphold the value of the individual, but we will help him or her find fulfillment in the community of Christ. We have a family, a body, with Christ in our midst. One of the most effective tools for outreach beyond 2000 will be the development of loyal and committed communities of faith to which we can invite all those who hunger and thirst to fill their God-given need to be in meaningful community.

We will give much greater emphasis to those passages, like the following in I Corinthians 12:12-13, which underline the importance of living in Christian community. *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body.*

And finally, **weakness and suffering will be our strength**. Like it or not, the church beyond Y2K will likely not hold a lot of power or have a lot of political clout. As you have already observed, the Christian perspective is not necessarily the prevailing one. Our voice will be one of many religious voices seeking to be heard. We will not likely be able to continue calling on the government to uphold and protect our values.

So we will have to bear witness to our world from a position of weakness and suffering. But in our weakness we will be strong in Christ. In our weakness we will lean on him who holds the universe in place. Through our brokenness the world will see the Christ broken for them. And in our suffering we will feel the fires of purification and renewal.

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. I Peter 2:20-21

Conclusion

As we move into the 21st century, we will do well to take stock of how our faith has been bent out of shape by the spirit of modernism. As we enter the postmodern era, we are being forced to re-examine our faith. While we will need to reject some aspects the postmodern agenda, some of the critique it brings to our faith shaped within modernism is forcing us to re-read the biblical text. And in the process many evangelicals are discovering an evangelical, Anabaptist faith perspective that has potential for addressing the world of the 21st century.

If we move into the third millennium with a renewed focus on story, an appreciation for wisdom, allowance for mystery, commitment to community, and a willingness to live in weakness and endure suffering, we will be well on the way to addressing the needs of the emerging generation in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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