Cultural Challenges Confronting Contemporary Ministry
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[Southeastern Wisconsin District, Pastor-Teacher Conference, June, 1999]

When the ascended Lord of the Church called Paul to be his apostle to the Gentiles, one half of the challenge was communicating truth that had been couched in the culture of Judaism to people whose own culture came with a different set of assumptions about, and approaches to, life. The other half of Paul's challenge was convincing the church that the Gospel was independent of the cultural forms ministry had assumed in Jerusalem. The New Testament suggests that the former challenge was met more readily than the latter.

The Savior was born and so was the church in a closed culture built around absolute truth and buttressed by centuries of tradition. The church's mission would take it into a wide open Greco-Roman world that was characterized by pluralism, the assumption that there was no one truth and that sophistication was sampling all the religious and philosophical explanations out there. The cradle of Christianity was a society of deeply held values and determined faith. The world into which the apostles took Christianity was cynical and sensual, a marketplace of values easily exchanged. The worldview of Judea was unifying, God making sense of thought and experience with his creation and revelation. The Hellenistic worldview was particularizing, with rational categories and competing systems of thought. St. Paul's mission journeys are better measured in cultural than geographical terms.

It took persecution to get the church out of its comfort zone in Jerusalem; and persecution would continue to keep the church from settling into institutional ruts. Once removed from the familiar, the church displayed a remarkable ability to adopt new forms and methods of ministry. The apostle's modus operandi, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Corinthians 9:22), made mission and message unalterable priorities while method changed with the culture into which the apostle was sent.

There are a lot of similarities between that "fullness of time" when the Savior was born and the church was commissioned, and the turn of the millennium in which we minister today. The church today has been evicted from the familiar territory of an at least nominally Christian culture, to do ministry in a hostile world whose view of life and ways of living are fundamentally at odds with what we hold dear. For especially older Christians there is a kind of disequilibrium, an inability to deal with all that has changed in American society over the past several decades. For many called workers that disequilibrium is a sense that the kind of ministry for which we were trained doesn't really exist any longer. We, today, are challenged to communicate the Gospel to a culture whose assumptions and experiences are different from our own. And the greater half of that challenge may be leaving behind what is comfortable, distinguishing truth from traditions, clarifying what dare never change from what may change and what must change. Our theological forebears in the Wisconsin Synod have prepared us with the maxim that "The Gospel creates its own forms of ministry."

Most of us would define cross-cultural ministry as the ethnic challenge of sharing the Savior with African-Americans or Hispanic or Asian Americans. And when we have understood the culture of people whose heritage is different from our own, we may be part way toward separating the faith from our own cultural experience of it. Shedding the arrogance that our cultural forms are superior or simply accepting the discomfort of leaving familiar forms behind in order to serve others may be a bigger step. Let me suggest, however, that there may be cross-cultural gaps greater than those formed by ethnic differences. Christians of different races have more in common with each other than do white middle-class Christians and white middle-class New Agers. A black World War II veteran and his white counterpart may share more cultural agreement with each other than either does with his Gen-X grandchildren. Churches have lost touch with their young and found themselves estranged from the neighborhood because there are cultural forces at work which may be more profound than the issues of race and income level. And the number of disuniting forces at work in our society is

increasing, because we have become a culture that celebrates differences. It may also be that Christians fail to recognize the "church culture," constructed over decades, that can be a buffer zone between the truth and those who need to know it.

Most of us don't even think about the number of things we have adopted and adapted from our culture in the structuring of ministry, nor would we recognize the subtle influences that our culture has on our understanding of the faith. The educational psychology and methodology that have helped to shape the way we teach the faith, for example, are borrowed from our culture and challenge us with change periodically. What constitutes good preaching is not simply a biblical definition; and the fact that people won't all agree on the criteria demonstrates the diversity in contemporary culture. And when will your church adopt direct-deposit offerings? More difficult may be to recognize the impact of American political philosophy on the decision-making process of our church or how the religious and moral climate of our era influences the doctrinal emphases we make. It is not simply a matter of how the church will address contemporary cultures. We ought to understand the impact a waning culture has had on our ministry.

This essay will explore two major forces and two lesser trends in American culture, together with the impact each has on the ministry of our churches. To argue that America will continue to be characterized by "Post-Christian" and "Postmodern" forces is subjective; but the impact of these two changes in our culture is undeniable. To describe the "Post-Patriotic" nature of generations born after World War II and the "Post-Literate" character of intellectual life in America is less faith-shaking, but certainly significant to the way in which we do ministry.

IT'S A POST-CHRISTIAN AMERICA.

Sometimes an event captures a cultural sea-change. A Christian woman was stopped by a teenager on Michigan Ave. in Chicago and asked why she was wearing a plus-sign on the gold chain around her neck. Even the universal symbol of Christianity is no longer universally recognized; and the number of people whose lifestyle denies the cross they wear as jewelry suggests that the meaning of Christ's cross has suffered cultural confusion.

One of the Jeff Foxworthy spin-offs says: "You might be Lutheran, if your parents still won't let you date a Catholic." Those of us who grew up in this part of the country in the fifties remember a world in which everyone was assumed to be a Christian; the only question was what denominational label you wore. The labels didn't mix. Evangelism was mostly romantic proselytizing or reclaiming some other church's inactive members. We knew what we stood for, and what Catholics and Methodists did or didn't stand for. It was a nicely ordered religious world. Now the religious labels don't fit so well; and most Christians refuse to wear their denominational name tag. Some Lutherans seem really distant; and anyone in the glare of the media who confesses Jesus makes you want to cheer. Religious life in America has become, well, disorderly.

Twenty-five years ago I could begin an evangelism presentation with, "If you were to die today, do you know for sure where you'd be?" and expect answers ranging from heaven, hell or purgatory to unsettling indecision. Today the answer is just as likely to be: "How can anyone know if we're going to be anywhere?" A few months ago CNN's Larry King hosted a panel discussion on what happens when we die. The panel consisted of one Christian, one Jew and three spiritualists offering new age, Eastern philosophy. The make-up of the panel is one measure of how much ground Christianity has lost in this country. By the way, have you noticed that the politically correct term is "spiritual," not "religious," today. "Spiritual" is so much more personal, so much less dogmatic sounding. So, how do you begin an evangelism presentation with someone who doesn't believe in heaven or hell?

Obvious signs that America is no longer a Christian nation - whatever that may mean - are the legal challenges to every symbol and celebration identified with the Christian faith, and the fascination Americans have with the power objects, ceremonies and prophecies of neo-pagan mysticism. Less obvious, but more significant are several other cultural shifts. People don't use the word "sin" much anymore; it's too judgmental. If we aren't accountable to a holy and just God, and if there aren't moral absolutes, the concept of sin isn't

comprehensible. We're going to have to figure out how to do the "sin" half of a sin-and-grace presentation with people who don't share our religious assumptions. The "good book" is a closed book to most Americans, who can't pass rudimentary quizzes about the Ten Commandments or the life of Christ. Some audience analysis may reveal that the theological terms and Bible stories we assume in our preaching, we can't. And maybe we shouldn't be over-confident of the average Lutheran's grip on basic doctrine. The 1998 survey conducted by Lutheran Brotherhood included this statement for response: "People can only be justified before God by loving others." 49% of the Lutherans surveyed agreed with the statement; 16% weren't sure. Only a generation ago, we could visit school families and delinquent members assuming social acceptance of the importance of going to church. The very word "delinquent" makes that assumption. Well, it is no longer a valid assumption in American culture.

Americans are concerned today about "values," an ambiguous word that has replaced the more religious sounding term "morals." "Ethics" is the application of philosophical principles to scientific conundrums such as cloning and to business practices too complicated for the law to keep pace. Concepts such as "right" and "wrong" have become archaic, it seems. In place of such traditional Christian virtues as honesty, chastity, the sanctity of life and piety, today's values in America are happiness, tolerance, self-esteem and environmentalism. Lawsuits and lotteries have replaced the so-called "Protestant work ethic" as the way to get ahead, and violence escalates as people lose faith and hope in the American dream. Materialism, you see, has been America's religion for longer than we may want to admit. A recent poll reported by the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel revealed that 1/3 of the people who believe abortion is murder also say it may sometimes be the best option available. Conservative Christians can only shake their heads. But please understand that, unless we are to become a pharisaical society of the pseudo-righteous, we must find a way to restore penitent baby-killers and to follow forgiveness with moral encouragement for Christians struggling with homosexuality. We are called to minister to the culture that is, not the culture we long for.

What has replaced Christianity at the core of American life is, first, psychology. If problems such as guilt or shame can be blamed on bad parenting or negative experiences or wrong thinking, then who needs forgiveness? If the goal of life is to be free of pain (happiness may be out of reach), then counseling is like having a personal shaman and pharmacology is more understandable than theology. Sigmund Freud dismissed God as just wish-fulfillment, "a cosmic childhood neurosis," the psychological desire for a father-protector. Carl Jung blended the psychological and the metaphysical with his "collective unconscious;" and he urged people to have a "peak" (read "religious") experience under the guise of science. Not surprisingly, people come to church today looking for therapy. They want to feel better. A religious industry of "feel good" religion has sprung up to capitalize on the market. Meanwhile, you and I struggle to make faithful application of law and gospel to real-life issues, steering a course between the Scylla of cultural compromise and the Charybdis of reactionary obscurantism.

Sociologist and author Robert Bellah coined the phrase "Sheilaism" (after a subject named Sheila) to describe the "designer religion" of our day. In Old Testament Israel this was syncretism, combining belief in Yahweh with the practices of paganism. Today, such eclectic religion allows people to cover all the bases - a little Judaeo-Christian ethic with some eastern meditation and a vaguely Islamic view of after-life. It isn't surprising, then, when polls demonstrate that people who call themselves Christians believe in reincarnation. A corollary of "personal" religion is the experience-based approach to Christianity that seeks confirmation in signs or emotions. The subjectivism that underlies this contemporary religious phenomenon becomes apparent in religious discussion with too many young Lutherans, who've adopted an intuitive basis for their beliefs. Things sort of seem right to them. And they don't feel they have the right to challenge what anyone else believes.

One more substitute for Christianity in our culture is religious legalism. Islam is reportedly the fastest growing religion in America, particularly among African Americans who haven't witnessed Christian love or Christian discipline. The Mormons have staked a claim on family values and built an empire around religious legalism. Cult-like counterfeits of Christianity (e.g. the Church of Christ - Boston) attract adherents with strict moral control... of just about everything in life, by the church. Legalism has an appeal for fed-up Lutherans, who want a simple solution to the break-down of their society. In a world of nauseating grays, the *opinio legis* is

quick to produce a whole new set of black-and-white answers. WELS preachers can identify the moralizing tendencies of Reformed paperbacks; but we don't as easily make our theology of sanctification practicable, perhaps concerned that our teaching of justification will be conditioned or that we will be guilty of programming the Holy Sprit's fruits of faith. St. Paul seems a good deal less nervous about preaching sanctification, as I read the epistles.

With the growing realization that America is a post-Christian nation comes a set of reactions within the church. For many the reaction is similar to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of dying. The first stage is denial and isolation. We try to console ourselves that the loss of our young people is just predictable rebellion, that they'll come back to the church one day. We argue that there's nothing new about contemporary society, just a few fads that will run their course; the church just needs to stay the course, keep doing what it's always been doing the way it's always been doing it. We withdraw from the world around us, if we aren't careful, turning the confessional nature of our church fellowship principle into an isolationist dogma. We retreat into our past and renew our ritual, accentuating our differences from contemporary culture.

The second stage is anger. Most of us can a put a name and a face or two with that anger. The evening news fuels it, as does the weekend family reunion and last night's voters' meeting. Things just aren't right. There must be somebody to blame. Both those who resist change and those who promote it find a common enemy in the church body's headquarters. Frustrated older church members are angry with younger members who don't pull their weight. For sure, if we had a better pastor or better teachers, we wouldn't be losing members. Some members want their church to preach more about what's wrong with society. There may already be too many sermons excoriating the world rather than calling sinners to repentance.

The third stage in the dying process is titled "bargaining." In a way, it's negotiating with God, trying to buy time. In the church it's the process of hanging on to the familiar for as long as possible. Hurting members want the church to be a refuge, a place where they don't have to deal with incomprehensible change, where things stay the way they remember them in happier times. Called workers in their fifties may want to stave off change and make it to retirement doing ministry the way they've become accustomed to doing it. There has been another kind of bargaining, more familiar to the Reformed but attractive to some of our Lutheran members. It's the political bargaining of the Christian Coalition and, before that, the Moral Majority. This persistent "civil religion" is built on the myth that America is somehow God's chosen people, and we must take back the country by electing the right candidates. A lot gets bargained away when civic righteousness replaces Christ's righteousness on the agenda.

The last couple of elections have been demoralizing to people who thought we could vote Christianity back into power in America. Cal Thomas, in a recent Newsweek monograph, gave up the quest for civil religion. And conservative Paul Weyrich has waved the white flag, sounding simply depressed. That's the fourth stage of the dying process: depression. Some churches are depressing places. People can only see problems. There are a hundred reasons why nothing will work. The mission field has become a cemetery of prematurely buried unbelievers. It's hopeless, after all. The mood is reactionary; we become the church that's against... You name it we're against it. People won't give, so we have to cut the budget. People don't come, so we cancel the programs. Yes, Jesus is the "head over everything for the church," but - as Father Luther put it - the gentle shower of the gospel has moved on. The church in America has more past tense to it than future.

Pure depression isn't sustainable. In the dying process it gives way to the final stage, acceptance. In the church, that acceptance can mean several things. For some American Christians it is a millennial thing. These are the last days, the tribulation. Some Lutherans, too, see signs of the end everywhere. We can even invest the Y2K fear with religious meaning. It's easier to accept the post-Christian nature of American culture if this is just the fulfillment of prophecy. Another kind of acceptance sees declining numbers in the church as a badge of orthodoxy. We must be doing something right because nobody likes us. This is the Jeremiah complex, or maybe it's just ecclesiastical spin-doctoring.

Permit me to look at this post-Christian America in an entirely different light.

There has been a kind of muddy quality about Christianity in a culture where everybody's a Christian if he isn't Jewish. Lutheran churches have accepted a definition of membership that is so much less than what our Lord calls us to: in frequency and fervor of worship, in the disciplines of spiritual growth, in the commitments of Christian fellowship and service, in a lifestyle of truth and love, in faithful and grateful stewardship of all God's blessings. A post-Christian culture may enable us to reinvest church membership with meaning. When it is no longer socially advantageous to belong to a church, when the family won't disown you if you don't, when things like marriage and burial have lost the religious veneer with which culture once coated them, then people may once again hold church membership as a confession of faith and a commitment to live out that faith. Then we can make evangelism calls on people who are clearly outside the church rather than delinquent calls on people who think that paying their dues and showing up at Christmas and Easter will renew their membership in God's "club."

In a post-Christian culture, maybe we won't face the embarrassment of another Gallup poll suggesting that you can't tell the Christians from the pagans by the way they live their life. When cultural Christianity has disappeared, genuine Christians may once again be recognized - as Jesus said they would - by their love for one another. When we're no longer taken for granted, Christians can again become salt and light.

The greater the distinction between church and culture, the better we may see our mission of evangelism. Let this post-Christian culture accentuate the exclusive claims of Christ, by rejecting them. Let the absurdity of the notion that everybody's right no matter what they believe and the hopelessness of a life that has neither purpose nor direction create the bleak backdrop for Christianity's sure truth and bright hope. And if it takes declining numbers to get the church's attention, then may the Lord of the Church recall us to our mission by our failures and frustrations at merely "doing church."

The problem, as I see it, is that we are not yet post-Christian enough. Both church and culture still cling to invalid assumptions about their divorce, perpetuating a less-than-honest relationship (e.g. "In God we trust."). Christianity doesn't offend people sufficiently yet, for its exclusive claim to absolute truth and an only Savior. Too many Christians are trying to recreate the church of 1950 instead of, under God, forging the church of 2000. There is little likelihood that we can turn back the clock, and even less virtue in doing so. However painful the transition, the church can be stronger in a Post-Christian Culture.

IT'S A POSTMODERN WORLD.

A popular illustration of postmodernism describes three umpires. The first, representing the objective realism of the Age of Enlightenment (modernism), says: "I call them the way they are." The second umpire, representing the subjective realism of twentieth century relativism, says: "I call them the way I see them." The third umpire, representing the perspective of postmodernism, says: "They ain't nothin' until I call them."

It might be easier to understand postmodernism in popular, rather than philosophical terms.

In art the term "pastiche" describes a collage of diverse, even incongruous, themes and colors and images. MTV presents rock videos that are disjointed and discordant, pasting together images and sounds and typography that assault one's senses with the denial of any unifying theme or objective reality. There is an underlying cynicism and pessimism to the lyrics. "Bricolage" describes articles of clothing that aren't coordinated and may represent different decades. Michel Foucault coined two terms to describe his philosophical challenge to conventional thought: "heterotopia" and "multiverse." Pop culture simply expresses the philosophy.

Several recent movies have been a blending and blurring of the real and the surreal, the historical and the fictional. What is reality in "Groundhog Day?" Oliver Stone's subtle blending of fact and supposition in "JFK" demonstrates the postmodern argument that history is simply politics and reality depends on who and where you are. "Dances With Wolves" was only the first of several films that celebrate pluralism, with the not-so-subtle suggestion that primitive cultures were perfectly fine until "western" (read "Christian") culture was imposed on them.

Television introduces postmodern thought in a number of venues. "Seinfeld" was the cynical show about "nothing" that exaggerated self-centered behavior until it appeared humorously normal. Homer Simpson is just Archie Bunker over-the-edge, a cynical caricature of old mores that goes down easier in cartoon format. While "Ellen" was either too jarring or too boring, the show made homosexuality part of the pluralistic picture of life that television promotes. "Friends" depicts postmodernism's subjective search for meaning in life - sans absolutes - within the small "community" in which one finds identity and security. The Fox network has emphasized the metaphysical curiosity of postmodernism in "The X-Files" and the still darker "Millennium."

Perhaps the easiest way to recognize the shift in culture is in the slang expressions of America's young. "Whatever," "As if" and "Deal with it" express a disinterest in resolving conflicting viewpoints, because there is an underlying disbelief in objective and absolute truth, coupled with a denial that life has any ultimate or unifying meaning. The average teen doesn't invest the expressions with all that content, of course; but there is a philosophical basis for pop culture. "It works for me" is an expression of postmodern pragmatism, subjective and experiential. "Multi-culturalism" is the politically correct term for postmodern pluralism, which exalts diversity and turns mutually exclusive differences into equally valid positions.

One way of defining postmodernism is that it is a reaction to "modernism," the culture of the Age of Enlightenment.

Modernism placed man at the center of reality, confident that the scientific method would discover truth and society could express that truth in universal propositions every thinking person would agree with. To the modern world knowledge was objective, good and accessible to the human mind. There was unflagging trust in reason and an unquestioning optimism about the progress inevitable through science and education. Then came more than one "war to end all wars," nuclear weapons, Viet Nam and Watergate, AIDS, rising crime and declining schools. Reason and science created as many problems as they solved and left life devoid of significance. There remained too many unanswered questions, questions reason and science would never answer, questions for which people began to believe there were no absolute answers. Americans still overestimate medicine and education. Modernism isn't dead; it's just on the critical list.

In contrast, postmodernism has no center of reality, no core explanation for life. In fact, reality is conditioned by one's context and experience. It is relative, indeterminate and participatory. There is no "truth" to discover, only preferences and interpretations. Radical pluralism means that there may be many "truths" alongside each other. There can be no objective truth or reality because there is no neutral stance from which to view things. Emotion and intuition are valid paths to knowledge, not just reason. And knowledge is always incomplete. "Community" replaces the "autonomous self" of modernism as the measure of things, the arbiter of what is only relative truth. A decentralized view of life accentuates cultural differences, while asserting the need to establish identity in one's own group. Rather than an optimistic confidence in progress, postmodernism has a pessimistic focus on human misery. It is the inevitable conclusion of existentialism, the denial of meaning, end or reason to life.

Several themes define postmodernism:

PLURALISM. Philosophical pluralism is the denial of any one, universal, central and unifying truth. Rather, there are many truths, culturally conditioned and subjectively interpreted. Pluralism insists on openness to and tolerance for all beliefs, values, traditions and lifestyles. A necessary corollary of pluralism is relativism, the denial of absolutes and the insistence that truth, right and reality are determined by the situation, the society or the self. Jimmy Long in his book *Generating Hope* quotes a student speaker at Harvard's graduation exercise: "I believe that there is one idea, one sentiment, which we have all acquired at some point in our Harvard career, and that is confusion... They tell us that it is heresy to suggest the superiority of some value, fantasy to believe in moral argument, slavery to submit to a judgment sounder than your own. The freedom of our day is the freedom to devote ourselves to any values we please, on the mere condition that we don't believe them to be true." Clearly, there is no room in such pluralism for a Jesus who insists: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

NON-OBJECTIVISM. This clumsy term encompasses several arguments of postmodernism. One is the rejection of reason as the sole and inevitable path to knowledge. Postmodernism believes that there are things that can be known only by intuition, faith or emotion, that all facts are not hard facts, that not all can be known, and that logical syllogisms and the scientific method have limited application. Further, postmodernism denies that there are absolute truths or objective reality, or at least that there is any way to know or posit these. In contrast, historic Christianity is based on the premise that God entered real history in the person of Jesus Christ, that our salvation is based on a set of absolute facts he accomplished, and that God not only can but does speak to us in objective, propositional truth that surmounts time and culture.

DECONSTRUCTION. Because postmodernism denies the possibility of objective truth, it locates meaning in the interpreter rather than in the text or object interpreted. Postmoderns argue that language "creates" reality, and that language is culturally conditioned and subjectively understood. Therefore, it is necessary to "deconstruct" a text, identify its cultural assumptions and philological baggage, then interact with the text personally. Betty Jean Craige explains deconstruction this way: "I. Things and events do not have intrinsic meaning. There is no inherent objectivity, only continuous interpretation of the world. 2. Continuous examination of the world requires a contextual examination of things. We ourselves are part of that context. 3. The interpretation of a text depends on the relative viewpoint and the particular values of the interpreter. Interpretation does not depend on the external text or its author. 4. Language is not neutral but is relative and is value-laden... Language and discourse convey ideology and . . . political values." Obviously then, to debate the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture would be ludicrous; and to argue for "correct" theology would be impossible. Hermeneutics, in postmodernism, has no canons and exegesis retreats to the realm of allegory from which the reformers once rescued it.

CYNICISM/ PESSIMISM. If there is no absolute truth, no central and unifying purpose to life, no possibility of arriving at certain knowledge of anything... if history and experience have exploded the myth that knowledge is good and progress is inevitable. . . if life isn't going anywhere but in circles, then cynical pessimism is inevitable. As evidence consider a few of the "Proverbs of Postmodernism" which appeared on the Internet. "The facts, although interesting, are irrelevant." "I have seen the truth, and it makes no sense." "Happiness is merely the remission of pain." "Friends may come and go; but enemies accumulate." "Suicide is the most sincere form of self-criticism." "Anything worth fighting for is worth fighting dirty for." "I'm OK, but you need professional help." "Not one shred of evidence supports the notion that life is serious." What a contrast to God's plan of salvation in linear history, to Jesus Christ as the center and meaning for life, to eternal life as the hope that makes life worth living and loving witness as a reason for being here, to joy in knowing not just absolute truth but the God who IS the Truth!

COMMUNITY. Without any universal truth or meaning to life... having rejected both nationalism and globalism. . . yet needing some basis for understanding self and life, postmodernism fixes life in the "tribe" or community where each individual finds meaning. The "myths" of each community create the parameters for understanding life. (There is no real worldview in postmodernism.) The traditions, experiences and language of each community express shared truth and reality. And within the community one works out psychological needs for such things as love and significance. Postmodernism shrinks a too incomprehensible world down to a manageable size and a meaningful context. Life is relational and experiential, not rational, for postmoderns. Can it be that the church became so identified with the tools and trappings of modernism that postmoderns cannot see the relational nature of Christianity and the love Jesus said characterizes his Church? Can we communicate the best of both worlds: absolute and universal truth together with a caring community in which to find identity and meaning?

It is not difficult to recognize several threats to Christianity in the tenets of postmodernism. The anti-historical nature of postmodernism makes the facts of Scripture quaint, cultural period pieces irrelevant to contemporary life, and the traditions of the faith mere tools for shoving a religion down people's throats. Pluralism becomes universalism in a religious context, reducing Christianity to just one of many paths to an ultimate reality that may or may not be. The denial of objective knowledge and absolute truth makes "doctrine" a dirty word and reduces "faith" to a psychological search followed by an intuitive leap. Deconstruction is

several more steps down the path paved by historical criticism and trod by the Jesus Seminar, the path away from taking Scripture seriously, on its own terms. Scholars use the term "meta-narrative" for an overarching story that explains life. The Bible is that, from creation to the fall, to God's interventions in word and deed in the life of his people, to the incarnation that accomplishes our salvation, and to the culminating event that will be Christ's return. Postmodernism denies this and any meta-narrative claiming to make sense out of life. Like Pontius Pilate, people respond to Jesus with a jaded, "What is truth?"

It is more difficult to recognize how much influence modernism has had on the church, despite the fact that modernism's extreme rationalism, scientism and humanism have been devastatingly antagonistic to Christianity. Have we become a more rational and argumentative church because we have attempted to counter the denials of truth raised by philosophers and evolutionists? Our development of doctrine has followed the principles of logic developed by western philosophy, perhaps failing sometimes to distinguish the theological from the logical and the sociological. Our insistence on the objective nature of truth may have been tilted out of balance with the subjective and relational dimensions of Scripture by the modern world in which we've ministered. We communicate far better to the head than to the heart. We have left little room for the "mystery" of Christianity and less room for a meditative relationship with God. Our people seem to have difficulty integrating right doctrine into a life of godly living and loving. We are able to see the guilt of sin because we have modernism's perspective of the courtroom (justification) and the marketplace (redemption). We may not so easily recognize the shame of sin postmodern people feel because we are less sensitive to the relational dimension of our faith (reconciliation). Christianity can never be identified with a culture, dare never be domesticated by a culture. Yet Christianity ministers within culture and can transform culture. Modernism and postmodernism are merely different cultural contexts, presenting different threats but also unique opportunities for the church's mission.

Will we recognize the opportunity for witness there is in a culture devoid of hope and meaning for life? Do we appreciate the opportunity to retell the story-line of Scripture for a society that no longer knows the biblical meta-narrative and has been told there is no such account that makes sense of life? Will we live out the love that, Jesus said, identifies his disciples for a generation that is not much interested in dogma but desperately searching for community? Can we adjust our understanding of volunteer service from the institutional model of our past to the relational model that fits our present? Douglas Coupland, the author who coined the phrase "Generation X," says in his book *Life After God*: "My secret is that I need God - that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I am no longer capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love."

In the book *Jesus For A New Generation*, Kevin Ford depicts the readiness of young adults to hear what the Christian Church has to share this way: "Xers are alienated. The Christian story brings reconciliation. Xers feel betrayed. The Christian story restores broken trust. Xers feel insecure. The Christian story brings a sense of safety within a protective, healing community. Xers lack a defined identity. The Christian story gives them a new identity in Christ. Xers feel unwanted and unneeded. The Christian story offers them a place of belonging, a place for involvement, a place where their lives can be used in service of a purpose that is larger than themselves." HOPE, LOVE, and MEANING are big Christian words that describe equally big avenues to a postmodern generation.

There are implications of postmodernism for the way we instruct our young. On the one hand, we will need to teach the objective and absolute nature of truth with more clarity, relevance and urgency, testing with "discernment activities" whether we are sufficiently countering the spirit of the age. We will need to confront the arguments of pluralism pointedly and assure that children know Jesus not only as the Savior, but as the ONLY Savior. We must sensitively distinguish between empirical pluralism, which appreciates the diversity of God's creation, and the philosophical pluralism that denies biblical truth and the exclusive claim of Jesus. We can better teach the skills of interpreting Scripture, so that the next generation isn't misled into subjective and deconstructionist approaches to the Word of God, which reduce truth to "opinion" or "interpretation." We can emphasize the hope and joy and meaning that Jesus gives our lives, not only to counteract the pessimism and

cynicism of music and movies, but to provide the basis for peer witness to children who are growing up with suicide as a legitimate option.

On the other hand, postmodernism should be a corrective to the heavily rational and cognitive nature of our "modernist" confirmation instruction. If we assume spiritual growth to be a lifelong process, we don't have to compress all we want young people to know into two or three years of academic activity. Young people process truth relationally more than cognitively, visually and experientially more than aurally. We can make Christian education more cooperative and relational, more life-related and experiential. We can build a more obviously loving community, in which our youth understand the love of God in the love of others and in which they understand what it means to be the Body of Christ.

There are implications of postmodernism for the way in which we do evangelism. Several evangelical authors argue that evangelism today must start farther back, with God, creation and the fall. If we don't agree on the problem Jesus addressed, the solution won't be comprehensible. If God is not the Creator and Ruler of our world, our assertion of sin's rebellion and Christ's atoning sacrifice lack context. Can we begin our witness out of the shame sin creates rather than the guilt? Maybe we'll have to re-establish, in practical terms, the logical law of non-contradiction before we will have an audience among people who believe all religions are right and none really matter.

Nearly everyone working with a postmodern audience emphasizes the need to demonstrate the claims of Christ by genuine love and moral integrity, in small enough settings that people can "experience" the truth of Christianity before they must confront its truth claims cognitively. The church being the Church, not traditional apologetic reasoning, is the argument that counters the protests of unbelief. Love is the apologetic that is not merely argued, but felt, not merely heard, but also seen.

There are other implications of a postmodern culture for the church. For example, the church can develop small groups to reach, grow and hold young adults, and create volunteer opportunities that are people-related, that form teams of volunteers and serve people directly. But it is not simply that the culture has changed which suggests changing methods and programs to the church. It is that in a changing culture the church rediscovers in Scripture what the previous culture obscured. Postmodernism, for all that is inimical to Christianity about it, may free us to see in God's Word truths and purposes and possibilities that modernism - equally inimical to the faith - obscured.

WE ARE BECOMING A POST-LITERATE SOCIETY.

USA TODAY made newspapers more visual, less challenging than, say, *The Wall Street Journal*. But an increasing number of Americans don't even subscribe to a newspaper. How many news channels (and sports channels and weather channels) are there on your cable network? You don't have to read. And if you're in a hurry, tune in "Headline News." If you're too busy to read the latest best-seller, you can listen to it on tape in your car. Forget "Cliff Notes;" there has to be a video version of whatever classic a high school literature teacher actually wants a kid to read. The concept in education of "multiple intelligences" means I don't have to feel dumb if literary comprehension and logical deduction aren't my strong suit. Still, studies such as *Why Johnny Can't Read* trouble the nation.

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.

Post-literate culture communicates in a sight/sound mosaic, a not-necessarily-sequential collage of ideas involving both hemispheres of the brain and addressing emotions as much as intellect. With a nervous laugh, many adults admit they get more out of the children's sermon than the regular sermon. You see, the preaching and teaching of the church has been typically linear in nature, emphasizing clarity of argument, logical outline, tight transitions, development of a main point and its inferences, left-brained, idea-oriented. The sermons and lesson plans we were taught to prepare are the product of an education measured in essays. They may "read" better than they "sound" because they are developed for a literate culture.

Television has taught us to think in pictures, not words, so we tend to react rather than think. We have become intellectually more passive, accepting sound bytes without supporting rationale. Our concentration span is shorter; we drift before the sermon is over, tune out the teacher's lecture. Television is about performing, not pondering. We've lost some of our ability to discern, our ability to exercise critical judgment. Television doesn't have time to create balance or perspective when networks are competing for our attention. Television is about what's believable, not what's true. And "image" is what's believable. History, like news, is a subject for entertainment, not understanding, so we hardly notice the slant that editing produces.

The World Wide Web has made far too much information available, whether as a smorgasbord for surfers or links for researchers. We don't know how to process that much information; we lack criteria by which to evaluate all this information. The consequences are poles apart: some trust no one; others believe anything. The stuff we learned at church shrinks amid all the bits and bytes of stuff assaulting our attention. Christianity gets moved from the center of our understanding to the margins. Why should we memorize? Education has become accessing information, not learning it.

Since we cannot turn back the clock, one response to a post-literate society is to wed our theological conservatism with sociological conservatism and appeal to that segment of our culture that shares our angst over the decline of civilization as we know it. That could be a legitimate "niche" mission.

A necessary response, it seems to me, is that we emphasize what's important in our preaching and teaching. "Less is more" in a surfeit of information. We may not get as much covered or as many verses memorized during religion classes and confirmation instruction; but if we nail down the basics and create a community of Christian love, we may be able to teach our children well beyond age 14. Equally necessary is teaching the criteria and process of discernment. "What the synod says" or "What my pastor taught" has never been a healthy confession of faith; it won't sell at all today. We won't teach discernment well with deductive methodology and pontificating short-cuts. We'll have to practice discernment with our young... and our older, patiently taking on the issues and arguments of the world, discussing how Scripture applies and being honest when it doesn't. In a post-literate world, people don't make connections and applications easily. Our teaching and preaching may have to be more explicit, more concrete, even more simple.

Some preachers have become more "visual" and "narrative" in style, increasing their use of vivid images, poignant stories and colorful metaphors. Others use visual aids and object lessons in the pulpit. A cogent argument compares such post-literate preaching with the pre-literate, oral style of biblical times. How about "power point?"

A Lutheran named Rich Melheim has created "Faith Incubators," a (confirmation) curriculum for post-literate, postmodern kids. The introductory video deliberately emulates the fast-moving, disjointed style of MTV. NPH offers computer software that gives interactive catechism quizzes, complete with goofy graphics. How about confirmation classes for the whole family via your church's web site?

The audience for ministry is simply not homogeneous. There are the literates and the postliterates, the mosaic and the linear thinkers, the visual and the auditory learners; and that's just scratching the surface of the challenge. But if we are becoming a post-literate society, from the bottom up, then to ignore the implications may mean a congregation of gray heads and dinosaurs.

WE'RE THREE GENERATIONS POST-PATRIOTIC.

Generation theory has become a popular way to explain why people act the way they do. Not how old we are, but the period in which we were born - and, therefore, the social and political impact on our formative years - makes us different. While generalizations are never valid when describing an individual, and the affect of a Christian home and church will counter the impact of culture, the church may better understand some of what it is experiencing through the lens of generation theory.

People born before the end of World War II have been labeled the "Builders," or the "Patriotic Generation." They have been succeeded by "Baby Boomers" (born 1946 to 1964), "Generation X or NeXt," and the "Millennial" generation soon to graduate from high school. I don't have to tell you that the Patriotic

Generation has been the strength of our churches, or that Boomers have tried to make too many changes in the church, or that Gen X has remained on the margins of the church. And you've already discovered, at budget time, that these generations aren't working with the same set of assumptions. Helping church members from different generations understand each other may avoid some conflict and promote more inclusive ministry.

People in their mid-fifties and older either experienced or were reminded of two world wars and a depression. They know the value of a buck and the old-fashioned way of earning it. They believe in saving for a rainy day and paying cash for everything except a home. More than 75% of the nation's wealth is controlled by this generation, along with more than 80% of America's savings. They've witnessed mind-boggling change in technology, in geo-politics and in the economy; they can adapt, but they yearn for a life that is slower, more stable and more sensible. They respect tradition and want a sense of reverence about worship. This is the patriotic generation because they believe in loyalty and duty, to God and country. They don't switch denominations or congregations easily; and when the church needs volunteers, they look for the sign-up sheet. They are hard-working and dependable. This has also been labeled the "Silent" generation because these seniors are very private about their feelings and their lives. However, they are not very tolerant of what doesn't fit their value system, and many will tell you what's wrong with yours.

"Boomers" are the product of social change and political upheaval in America. They fostered various "rights" movements and now assume those rights. This is the generation whose T-shirts say: "Question authority!" They don't trust the institutional church much more than they do the government. Boomers are introspective, even self-absorbed, and tend to see spiritual life as a personal "journey." They may migrate from church to church, even religion to religion. They want the church to address their needs and preferences with multiple program options. They are less likely to join organizations at church than the previous generation; and they want their volunteer efforts to be personally fulfilling and efficiently organized. They are less likely than their parents to give to world missions or, for that matter, to a unified budget. Debt is a way of life for Boomers. They'll give to projects they believe in. They are the ultimate consumers, and they expect quality from the church. They tend to look for up-beat music and worship that "speaks to their heart." It is this generation, not those younger, for whom contemporary worship was created. Critics says they have big ideas, but small commitments.

One way of defining Generation X is that they are the antithesis of the Baby Boomers. They are more conservative and have lower expectations. They aren't into big institutions or big causes. They value time and relationships over money. They grew up in front of the television, often without the attention of their two-wage-earner parents. That television, and the music of MTV, created a bleak outlook for Gen-Xers. Broken and recreated homes have been one of the legacies they inherited. Not surprisingly, these young adults are waiting longer to get married; they want to create the family many of them didn't experience, but they're scared. They don't make easy or early commitments, but they will volunteer to serve in projects that make a difference in the lives of people. Their approach to worship is outwardly casual but inwardly intense and emotional. They need help coping with life, and many aren't afraid to admit it. Because this has been called the first postmodern generation, many of the descriptors of postmodernism fit America's young adults.

One place where generational differences show up is in the organizational structure of the church. The patriotic generation can't understand why younger members don't come to voters' meetings and get more involved. They have trouble letting go and are inclined to criticize younger members who don't do things "right" or who spend what the church doesn't have. Boomers can't see wasting time at meetings that aren't well organized, last too long and seldom accomplish much. And it is this generation, male as much as female, that has trouble with denying women the right to vote. This generation is highly critical of ineffective leaders. They want to take over, but tire readily when the pace of change in the church is too slow. Generation X doesn't see much value in the business side of the church, are content to let others lead, and will wait to be invited personally to get involved. Churches that haven't made adjustments in the way they are organized probably will.

The patriotic generation still believes that every woman in the congregation should belong to the Ladies Aid. They can't understand why the Youth Group that they enjoyed years ago doesn't attract today's teens. If

there's an event at the church, everybody should attend. Boomers don't see why age, gender or marital status is sufficient reason to get together. They respond better to support groups and affinity groups, with small-group Bible study one of their contributions to the life of the church. The Gen-X members don't want to join a group. They'll attend an event if it sounds interesting. They'll hope to make friends. They'll enjoy a serious discussion in an informal setting. But they won't sign up ahead of time. These are just generalizations, of course, but they help to make sense of what the church is experiencing.

I'm not sure there's a New Testament word that parallels our notion of culture. The Greek word *ethos* comes close, but isn't used often in the New Testament. As the Bible study will explore, the words *kosmos* (world) and *aiown* (age or era) become pejorative expressions for an anti-Christian culture. There is another word that's worth considering. *Hodos* is most readily translated "way," as in "way of life." Maybe you recall that in Acts 9:2 and 24:14 Christianity is referred to as "The Way." We can recapture that understanding of our faith; we can become a Christian "counter-culture."