

**A Report on the “Out of the Christian Ghetto” Conference  
April 6, 2001**

**Dr. John P. Davis**

Dan Allender began with what he called the “ghettoization” of the church. A ghetto is a region of the city where a minority is segregated. The church has created a walled community of its own culture. He referenced Nietzsche’s three-fold challenge to Christianity if he were to believe in the Christian God:

- 1) Sing me better songs;
  - 2) Show me the person who wears on his face the countenance of someone who really believes the beatitudes;
  - 3) He could never believe in a god who doesn’t dance.
- Dan argued that the gospel must be freed from Christianity.

He said that post-modernism has set free many people to hear the gospel but they will not hear the gospel unless it is set free from its encultured Christianity. The gospel is in bondage to modernism and must be set free. When we isolate ourselves in a Christian ghetto we lose our identity as authentic Christians. In Christ there is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but a whole new way. We must always be finding this new way.

Brian McClaren spoke about culture. He pointed out the impossibility of having any message without culture. Culture is a shared socially constructed universe that a group of humans inhabit. He mentioned how Tillich said that you could read the style of any culture to understand its religious substance. Every interpretation of the gospel is imbedded in some cultural form. The gospel doesn’t exist apart from versions of it in different cultures. Jesus did not come to drive the culture from the people but to drive the sin from the culture. There is no such thing as a “biblical culture. A perusal of the Bible discloses many cultures: hunter/gatherer; monarchical; agricultural, and differing political

structures. God worked in and through many different cultures. Brian used the illustration of the *nacirema* tribe that seemed to be obsessed with things like urination and defecation. One of their rituals when they were sick was to take samples of their urination and defecation to their tribal priests for inspection. We may look at that as an odd practice. Yet that was their culture. (Actually, *nacirema* is “American” spelled backward.)

Don Hudson spoke on how we read texts. He gave a history of interpretive method beginning with the *metaphysical age* which covered from the Greek philosophers to the early church Fathers. In that age, the idea was one. The ideal was everything. Ideal truth was spiritual truth. Real truth existed in a higher form or an idea. He used an illustration from trout fishing: “it is not the trout but the idea of the trout.” In that age the interpretive method was allegory.

The next age was the *semantic age* which covered from the Renaissance to 1972. Here the methodology was one. The literal was everything. Ideal truth was rational truth. Real truth existed in a “right” reading of the text which resulted in interpretation that was orderly, homogeneous, and universal. He referenced Spinoza (“the word is literal”), Aquinas (“God is rational”), Luther (“the text is one”), and Calvin (“Every human is suspect”). Again, he employed the trout illustration: “to understand the trout dissect the trout.” In that age the interpretive method was “literal, historical, grammatical.”

The next age was the *semiotic age* from the early 1900’s until now. In this age everything in the world is a sign. Signs point to the idea of truth. The sign is not the truth. We create our own meanings in the context of our cultures. In this age the methodologies are many. The Word is infinite. As a sign, it is never done with meaning. All truth is

relational truth. The question today is not “is it authoritative” but “ is it relevant.” The interpretive method in this age is simultaneity. Again, using the trout illustration: “the trout are everywhere, let’s go fishing.” Meaning occurs between the text of the Bible and the text of my life. True faith deconstructs religion in every age and reconstructs meaning. Dan referenced Derrida (“Every moment has an agenda”), Foucault (“the author is dead”), Kristeva (“texts are everywhere”), and Saussure (“Everything is a sign”). Dan noted that truth occurs within the play of signs within a community. He contrasted a modern and postmodern methodology.

<b>Modern</b>	<b>Postmodern</b>
Order	Participatory
Systematic	Simultaneous
Harmony	Heterogeneity
Utopian	Re-interpretive
Rational	Relational
“I own the truth”	“No one owns the truth; we seek the truth.”

Dan Allender then spoke again on “who are we as human beings?” He spoke of the irresolvable paradox of being “in the world” yet not “of the world.” He suggested two extreme answers: legalism (not of the world) and licentiousness (in the world). He said we are always searching for but never fully finding the answer to this dilemma. He said that moderns and Postmoderns have one thing in common – the hate being broken. If we will minister to Postmoderns we must enter into our shame. Shame is what humanizes all of us.

The human condition in regard to the soul is one of suspicion of any totalizing narrative, a sense of indeterminacy that lacks hope, and a fragmented love. This postmodern condition was brought about by the failure of modernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the pre-modern world one's sense of identity was tied to his trade, locale, and faith. "I am my trade, my community, and my faith." In the modern world a Cartesian understanding controlled one's identity. "I think, therefore I am." In this way of thinking, man is at the center; self is at the core.

WWI was the destruction of any confidence in modernism. There was a profound loss of faith. WWII was brought about the unjust treaty of Versailles, which produced a disenfranchisement that caused people to look for a false hero. This war was the destruction of future hope. WWII (Korean and Vietnam) brought to an end the Age of Aquarius and the resultant loss of the hope of love. Our culture feels a sense of betrayal because of the loss of faith, hope, and love.

Our goal in reaching this world is contained in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. I will step into your world and create myself anew in order to reach you. However, I can't understand their problem unless I am wrestling with my own. We all have a common identity in Creation and the Fall. In some sense we are worse than non-believers are because we know better. Our calling to reach a postmodern world should evidence the following:

- 1) openness to the task,
- 2) a curiosity in the another's story,
- 3) an empathy that is willing to laugh and cry with others,
- 4) a willingness to wait for an invitation,
- 5) a desire to create a place for provision, where we deal with the harm of living in a fallen world.

If Christians will minister effectively they must recapture playfulness and humility.