

**Postmodernism and Ministering to Today's Youth**  
**Dr. John P. Davis, Pastor of Grace Fellowship Church**  
**Sunnyside, NY**

## **Where are today's Youth?**

The following is an excerpt from a presentation on "The Gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" delivered by an unnamed Young Life Staff person from Germany.

*Adolescents are creatures in the middle of transformation. They are adult-like enough to be insatiably drawn to the adventure of a world that is "out there", yet they are child-like enough to see the falseness that lay therein. They are in a state of flux between the innate knowledge of childhood (wonder, ideals, belief, certainty), and the uncharted adult terrain ahead. They wonder if they will lose it all in the pursuit of adulthood, and yet the lure is irresistible. They see adults who appear to have sold-out who they are, for the sake of the roles they fill, or in desperation, have set aside all roles (parental, marriage, etc.) in search of their lost self. They see hopelessness in the eyes of the adults around them and this is a profound discouragement to them. Teens are looking for role models who can offer them the substance of a well-lived life. Words that do not stand on the foundation of this well-lived life are dismissed as weak and inauthentic. Kids want the adults in their life to be "real".*

*Their experiences are unique and diverse. Socio-economically, culturally and racially, in a myriad of different ways, kids grow up with the reality of their day-to-day experiences held against the backdrop of an invasive commercial prototype. Daily, they are reminded that wealth and beauty are the supposed norm. Daily, they feel that they do not measure up. The trends change so quickly that even they cannot keep up. For*

*the trends are not set by they, themselves, but by corporate America, seeking a population with discretionary income, that is easily exploitable.*

*Sometimes living in pendulum swings of emotion, kids often experience polarized perceptions and feelings. They have the feeling that they are bigger than life and/or that they are insignificant and have no place at all. Outward expressions are often a deep reflection of the suffering that goes on within. Eating disorders are prevalent. Self-cutting is not unusual. Kids live in a terrain where sex can kill you, and recreational drugs are commonplace. Some use these methods as a means to cope or to learn about life. Humor is biting, mocking the politically correct code of their elders of just a few years.*

*The risks that are taken along the way often reflect these hopeful-hopeless swings of experience. Seeking adulthood but having not yet arrived, they often feel as though they are isolated. Consequently, they form subcultures and kinship groups with peers. Feeling as though they are cut-off from both childhood and adulthood, they often see themselves as a sound byte instead of a song. And so, together, one with another, they create their own music.*

*Gospel offers hope to all music-makers. Jesus offers himself as a companion and source to those who wish to explore the human experience. I have found that adolescents have great capacity to hold the ambiguity of the message as long as they know they are not walking alone. After all, they are "walking ambiguity" themselves. There is an innate understanding of that which is given freely and at the same time*

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*costs everything. They know about the present-- that life is here and now, but understand, too, the truth that "groans with anticipation" of completion. They exemplify both the ecstasy of reflected glory and the anguish of knowing they fall terribly short. Finally, though harder to identify, they know the One whose image they reflect, but who elusively slips away once the knowledge becomes tangible.<sup>1</sup> I believe that adolescents can know these things, in many ways, better than adults. Often adults' lost wonder, their own sense of story and their capacity to believe is buried too deeply to access.<sup>2</sup>*

### ***Modernism and Postmodernism***

Millard Erickson gives a brief historical survey of the periods leading up to postmodernism. He introduces postmodernism as "an intellectual movement growing out of and supplanting modernism" (Erickson, Millard J. Postmodernizing the Faith. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1998, 14). He contrasts postmodernism with premodernism, a period that reflected a belief that the universe was rational and that what one observed was not the whole of reality. Evident also was a supernaturalism, an understanding of reality

that was teleological, a belief in the objective existence of the universe and of the correspondence theory of truth, including the referential understanding of language (Ibid, 15).

Modernism grew out of premodernism, incorporating some of premodernism's beliefs, such as the correspondence theory of truth, the referential understanding of language, and a belief in metaphysical realism. However, modernism moved away from premodernism in that it explained the reasons for these ideas in naturalistic ways with nearly total reliance on scientific method. Erickson speaks of both a soft and hard modernism, the latter form entirely excluding any type of supernaturalism (Ibid, 15-18).

Postmodernism reflects an influence of deconstruction, historicism, and neo-pragmatism. Postmodernism rejects the objectivity of knowledge, foundationalism, any all-inclusive explanations of life, and the idea of progress. Postmodernism also questions the inherent goodness of knowledge, as well as the scientific method. To postmodernism knowledge is community-based rather than individually achieved. As he did with modernism, Erickson proceeds to speak of a soft and hard postmodernism. The former leaves room for the supernatural and the possibility of knowledge beyond sense experience. The latter rejects any sort of objectivity or rationality and moves from a relativistic view of language to pluralism. Erickson sees soft postmodernism as an open door to communicate Christ, while hard postmodernism is a threat to biblical Christianity (Ibid, 18-20). What follows are some of the contrasts that characterize the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (New York, Image Books, 1968) 177.

<sup>2</sup> According to a story told by Martin Buber, Rabbi Mendel once boasted to his teacher Rabbi Elimelekh that on evening he had seen the angel who rolls away the light before the darkness, and at morning the angel who rolls away the darkness before the light. "Yes," said Rabbi Elimelekh, "in my youth I saw that, too. Later on you don't see such things anymore." From Louis M. Savary, Patricia H. Berne, *The Art of Spiritual Presence*, (New York, Paulist Press, 1988), 133.

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world of youth and the world of their parents.

**Modernism (Parental World)**

**Postmodernism (Youth World)**

Rational -----  
 Certain -----  
 Hard Sciences -----  
 Autonomous -----  
 Individualistic -----  
 Analysis -----  
 Objective -----  
 Religion/society -----  
 Persuade me -----  
 Nationalism -----  
 Consumerism -----  
 Conquest -----

Experiential  
 Suspicious  
 Soft Sciences  
 Interdependent  
 Community  
 Synthesis  
 Subjective  
 Spirituality  
 Show me  
 Globalism  
 Stewardship  
 Conservation

Critical -----  
 Absolute -----

Listening  
 Relative

**Foundationalism**  
 (Parental 'knowing')

**Non-foundationalism**  
 (Youth 'knowing')

Universal  
 Self-evident  
 Verifiable  
 Non-inferential  
 Incurrigible

Provincial  
 Discovered  
 Tentative  
 Interconnected  
 Yielding

## **Statements Highlighting the Contrast between Modernity and Postmodernity**

**In modernity -- there is a direct correspondence between  
the objective external world and my knowledge of it.**

In Postmodernity – since it is our concepts, language, and discourse that represents “reality,” we can never get outside of our own knowledge to check its objectivity.

In Postmodernity – if reality is a human-social construct, then how can any one perception of reality be a basis for judging another's perception of reality.

In Postmodernity – totalizing perceptions of reality have often been a basis for violent treatment and domination of others.

In Postmodernity – No one has privileged access to truth.

### **Connecting with the postmodern mind:**

- Though all perceptions of reality are somewhat human and social constructions, it is yet human to seek “truth.”
- Though no human can know anything comprehensively, we can know some things accurately.

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- Understand that theology is a second-order, contextual discipline.
- First order beliefs are those affirmed by all, in all places, at all times.
- Show that Christian belief is rooted in Scripture, tradition and community, not in relativism.
- Explicate a “Christian rationality” that is rooted in faith.
- Emphasize the real ongoing, experiential work of the Holy Spirit.
- Present theology as a developing conversation of someone on a journey.

**EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP**

- Do evangelism and Discipleship in the context of community.
- Make your conversation with pre-Christians and young Christians more like a dance than a war.
- Recognize a postmodern's need to belong before he believes.
- See evangelism as a wholistic process, not just the “saving of souls.”
- Realize that though Jesus is the only way to God there are many roads to Jesus.
- Rediscover that appreciation of beauty often precedes acceptance of truth.
- Our evangelism must show that the “meta-narrative” of Scripture is one of compassion and not the abuse of power.
- Since suffering is a universal for all human beings, we must show how the biblical message best answers the questions of suffering.

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- Evangelism must be incarnational. It must incarnate the love of Christ.  
*In a culture where God is irrelevant, it is not the task of the minister to prove relevance. The task is to love. To a post-modern generation that finds meaning only when it has been humanly assigned, a generation that often disbelieves in an intrinsic value to anything; it is not the job of the minister to assign meaning to the Gospel. It is to love. We do not need to conjure up presentations of reasonableness of Gospel to “enlightenment thinking” adolescents. We need to cross over to where they are and love them (Young Life Staff Person).*

## **LEADERSHIP**

- Focus on commitment to the postmodern triangle.



- Recognize that the unifying factor is the mission *not the church culture*.
- Change is inevitable, necessary, and good.
- Be a change agent and a change manager.
- See an “image” of how we want people to see our church.
- Identify the values that we need to have and want others to have.
- Work most with those who are teachable and receptive to change.
- All change or lack of change means that we lose some. If we had to choose, do we prefer to lose innovators or resisters?

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In summary, the aforementioned unnamed Young Life Staff from Germany offers these suggestions for communicating with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Youth.

*The minister of Gospel must communicate:*

- *I am interested in who you are.*
- *I am interested in what you do.*
- *If invited, I will enter in and be present with you where you are.*
- *I will find and show you that which is lovely about you.*
- *I will tell you about me, in appropriate measure.*
- *I will be here, as fully as I can, while I am with you.*
- *I will offer you honesty as I see it, when you are ready to receive it.*
- *I will help you author your own story, as seen through my loving eyes.*
- *I will offer you healing and wholeness.*
- *I will point you to my Source, so that when I leave, you will know where to turn (prayer, scripture, community, the art of 'seeing the sacred evidence' left all around us)*
- *I will help you to discover the Holy Spirit within.*

*The relationship between adult and adolescent must be authentic and appropriate. It matters not whether he/she is 'gangsta' or pierced, shaved or dyed, it is the gesture of love, no matter how awkward, that counts.*

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## **RESOURCES**

### **WEBSITES**

<http://www.the-next-wave.org/links>

<http://www.antithesis.com/>

<http://www.theooze.com/main.cfm>

<http://www.marshallforum.org/>

<http://www.gocn.org/>

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