

**PROCLAIMING
JESUS CHRIST
TO AN AMERICAN
POSTMODERN SOCIETY**

**A three part sermon series
based on the Mars Hill discourse
Acts 17:16-33**

Mark Beard

© 12-2000 by Mark Beard

PREACHING CHRIST TO A NEW WORLD

© Mark Beard

Text: Acts 17:16-21

Are you familiar with the term Postmodernism? If you are not familiar with the term then you probably are not aware that the church world is being greatly affected by its impact. First of all, let me assure you that I have no desire to get into a technical discussion about postmodernism. But it is important for us to have an understanding of all that is affecting our work for the Lord. To begin with let us try to simplify the meaning of it all.

Stanley Grenz, a professor of theology (at Carey and Regent College in Vancouver, BC) and author of the book, A Primer on Postmodernism, has used the TV shows Star Trek and Star Trek: The Next Generation to point out these differences adeptly.

Modernism, Grenz says, is like Mr. Spock in the original Star Trek series. He was part Vulcan and part human. Yet he always wanted to be more like his emotionless Vulcan side. Didn't he? He was a man who wanted to be more like a machine.

Mr. Spock, an example of the modern man longing for more productivity and for empirical, scientific proof of reality. A fair description perhaps of the generation which produced the industrial and technological revolutions and the individualism which has characterized our country for nearly 200 years.

Postmodernism is like Data, the machine in Star Trek: The Next Generation who wants to be a man...who wants to feel and love and experience reality—not just know and analyze it.

Identifying perhaps more with Data, young people today feel more like machines who don't know how to have relationships but desperately long for them and for a sense of community which most of their families did not provide.

Modernism is like Captain Kirk going out to conquer and subdue the “final frontier, where no man has gone before.” Postmodernism is like Captain Picard guiding his politically correct crew through space and helping to solve conflicts without stepping on anyone's toes. Not conquering, but reconciling and making the galaxy a safe place.

Most young people today have been trying to avoid conflict all their lives, trying to keep peace while growing up in often divorce ravaged homes and emotionally scarring families.

In a sense, this is Postmodernism: a different, subjective, experiential way of looking at the world, and a deep skepticism which does not believe in moral, absolute or universal truths.

Can you begin to see the difficulty of doing a traditional approach to church for a very untraditional generation?" (Zafren 4)

If we hope to relate Christ to our world we must understand the *changes* that have come to America in the "Postmodern" era.

I. WE MUST BE AWARE THAT WE ARE LIVING IN A POSTMODERN SOCIETY (vv. 16-17).

A. American is detached from any common devotion (v. 16).

In Paul's experience in Athens's he saw a city filled with idols and given over to idol worship. This would indicate that polytheism was rampant. One does not have to look for long to find that America has fallen to the idols as well.

In addition, the people had no common religious foundation. Someone said that the cause of true Christianity's decline in America is the disintegration of our culture. And as our culture becomes more diluted and diverse new religions are able to gain acceptance. No one challenges their validity.

George Barna, in his book, If Things Are So Good Why Do I Feel So Bad, writes, "The information barrage has led to a nation of people who feel culturally naked, personally disconnected, professionally perplexed, spiritually undernourished, and emotionally uninspired. Although we have the machines and the means to grind out reams of information, we have little grasp of how to humanely interpret that data or to wisely apply the accumulated knowledge represented in the ocean of facts readily accessible. (Barna 26)

B. Americans, by and large, have given up on traditional religious affiliation (v. 17).

This does not mean that no one wants to be a Christian anymore. Today as in Paul's day, even in Athens, there were "God fearing"

people (v. 17). There are still God fearing people around today, but the way people think has greatly changed.

As Barna writes, “At the same time that we have broader exposure to a variety of religious faiths, we appear to know less and less about what we believe and why we believe it. America has more religious institutions than any other nation on the planet—more than 300,000 churches, synagogues, and other houses of religious activity. But what difference does it make? We have forfeited our historic ethics and morals to the gods of achievement and comfort. Our moral compasses have been reprogrammed to point to a new north. Our sense of the divine has been compromised so that as a nation we have almost no awe of God or intention of respecting His rules.

We have replaced the presence of God with well-intentioned but superficial religious activity. We have substituted cultural idols for the eternal God. We have swapped the preeminence of the Creator for the centrality and pampering of self. All of these diversions have left us spiritually bankrupt, morally depraved, and ethically uncertain.” (Barna 26-27)

II. WE MUST BE AWARE OF THE RELIGIOUS MINDSET IN OUR SOCIETY (vv. 17-18).

Two extremes seem to dominate the American religious mindset.

A. Some are so “open minded” that they accept almost any idea as valid (v. 17b).

Apparently this was the attitude that Paul faced. These people seemed to be open to all ideas. It is not ironic though that they would reject the gospel of Christ—the only belief that called them to commitment or revealed their accountability to God.

B. Others have rejected traditional religion altogether (v. 18).

Note the two primary attitudes with which Paul was dealing and you will not that things have not changed. Also, note that neither line of thought makes any real demands on the believer.

“Athens was the home of the rival Epicurean and Stoic schools of philosophy. Epicurus (342-270 B.C.) held that pleasure was the chief goal of life, with the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquillity free from pain, disturbing passions, superstitious fears, and anxiety about death. He did not deny the existence of gods but argued in deistic fashion that they took no interest in the lives of men. The Cypriote Zeno (340-265 B.C.) was the founder of Stoicism, which took its name from the "painted Stoa" (colonnade or portico) where he habitually taught in the Athenian agora. His teaching centered on living harmoniously with nature and emphasized man's rational abilities and individual self-sufficiency. Theologically, he was essentially pantheistic and thought of God as "the World-soul."

Epicureanism and Stoicism represented the popular Gentile alternatives for dealing with the plight of humanity and for coming to terms with life apart from the biblical revelation and God's work in Jesus Christ. (Post-Christian paganism in our day has been unable to come up with anything better.) (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*)

III. WE MUST BE AWARE OF OUR SOCIETY'S WILLINGNESS TO DEBATE RELIGION ENDLESSLY (vv. 19-20).

A. The debates are endless primarily because absolute truth is rejected.

University professor Allan Bloom writes, “Almost every student entering university believes or says he believes that truth is relative. They fear not error, but intolerance. They ask, ‘What right do I or anyone else have to say one (culture or religion) is better than another?’ ... Respect for the sacred, real religion and knowledge of the Bible have diminished to the vanishing point.” (Bloom 26,56)

We have our own “Mars Hill” of sorts on many college campuses around the country as well as on television and in the print media. The debate rages and God’s Word gets pushed further to the side every day.

B. Our “new world” is marked by a love of ideas and knowledge rather than of God.

Like the Athenian world that Paul encountered people of our own world have given themselves over to their own arrogance.

Romans 1:21-25 & 28 tells us about such people, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.

CONCLUSION

We must proclaim Christ to a society that we know has its mind set against God. Understand that the message of Jesus Christ has always been “foolishness” to those who were perishing. On the surface real spirituality does not sparkle to this world. A.W. Tozer wrote, “True spirituality manifests itself in certain dominant desires.

1. First is the desire to be holy rather than happy.
2. A man may be considered spiritual when he wants to see the honor of God advanced through his life even if it means that he himself must suffer temporary dishonor or loss.
3. The spiritual man wants to carry his cross.
4. Again, a Christian is spiritual when he sees everything from God's viewpoint.
5. Another desire of the spiritual man is to die right rather than to live wrong.
6. The desire to see others advance at his expense.
7. The spiritual man habitually makes eternity-judgments instead of time-judgments. (Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom)

The good news is that at the heart of true spirituality is exactly what this society needs. If we will live our Christianity to the fullest the those around us will see its reality in spite of all the *changes* our society may go through.

References

Barna, George. If Things Are So Good Why Do I Feel So Bad? Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994.

Bloom, Allan. The Closing of the American Mind. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.

Gaebelein, Frank E., Gen ed.. The Expositor's Bible Commentary: CD-Rom. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

New International Version of the Bible from The Expositor's Bible Commentary: CD Rom. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Tozer, A.W. "That Incredible Christian." Christianity Today in Bible Illustrator 3 CD Rom. Parsons Technology, 1998.

Zafren, Keith M. Why A Church For A Postmodern Generation Of Seekers?
16 March 1997 <<http://www.the-river.org/messages>>

CONFRONTING THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

© Mark Beaird

Text: Acts 17:22-23

Whether one is watching Oprah or cable television where all sorts of people have access to the air waves to share their brand of spirituality one can easily see that many gods are embraced.

■ David Wells, in No Place for Truth, had this to say, “While religious pluralism may be a novel experience for us, it is putting us in touch with the world that surrounded the biblical authors. The pluralism and the paganism of Our Time were the common experience of the prophets and apostles. In Mesopotamia, there were thousands of gods and goddesses, many of which were known to the Israelites—indeed, sometimes known too well. ... Nothing, therefore, could be more remarkable than to hear the contention, even from those within the Church, that the existence of religious pluralism today makes belief in the uniqueness of Christianity quite impossible. Had this been the necessary consequence of encountering a multitude of other religions, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul would have given up biblical faith long before it became fashionable ... to do so.” -- Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 8.

We live in a society caught up in all manner of “spirituality” and diverse religious thought. As we note the *conditions* of our society we will no doubt see the parallel between our society and that of the Athenians

I. RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL THOUGHT CONSUME OUR SOCIETY (v. 22).

A. America is consumed by knowledge but lacks peace of mind.

People in America, as a rule, know more because of education, are exposed to more through the internet and media, and in some cases have more than ever before. The economy is better than it has been in years and people are even living longer. But fear of the future or about the future continues to stay in the forefront of their minds. America lacks peace of mind more than anything else.

B. The church is consumed with knowledge but lacks relevance.

■ It has been said that, “We have become the first completely post-Christian generation in the history of our culture. Our generation does not know God. Yet this is a generation that yearns and searches for spiritual reality. So far it is not finding it in the church.’

Those are the opening lines from the book, Reckless Hope, by Todd Hahn and David Verhaagen.

The first post-Christian generation in the history of our culture...not finding the satisfaction to our spiritual longing in the church. If that is true, it is tragic.

Are we prepared for the possibility of losing an entire generation of young people to a life and an eternity which does not experience the love of God, relationship with Jesus, forgiveness of sin, true healing of soul wounds, and salvation from eternal judgment? Are we willing to let that happen?

If not, we’d better pay attention to a radically shifting culture all around us and a generation of young people who do not think or process information like the generation before them did. Views of truth and reality itself are completely changing and it is no exaggeration to say that people are not the same at all in very significant ways as they were a generation ago.

No wonder the church has become irrelevant to so many people of our generation. No surprise that spiritual seekers are looking to self-help formulas and to new age and eastern mysticism to fill the spiritual void they feel and to find the answers to the questions of the meaning of life they are asking.” (Zafren 1)

These men that Paul was addressing were men who were literally consumed with the idea of religion. They were “very religious.” They evidently thought that the more they knew the more spiritual enlightenment that they would have. This was not the case. They were no more at peace than the rest of the world around them.

What a picture of the church world today! We have increased in knowledge and increased in anxiety. We have embraced many views and many answers in the hopes of finding a better way and we have lost the peace of a genuine experience.

The answer to a society that is embracing false religions instead of Christianity is for the church to become authentic in every way—not for us to embrace and accept everything that comes along.

II. NEW OBJECTS OF WORSHIP HAVE TAKEN THE PLACE OF JESUS CHRIST (v. 23a).

A. Instability has been the result of our society open-mindedness.

Instead of achieving understanding we as a society are more doubleminded than ever. We are worshipping what we do not even understand!

■ “Postmodernism produces a lack of coherence in (young people). An idea doesn’t have to be logical for them to subscribe to it. That’s the reason they can hold seemingly paradoxical viewpoints at the same time. If you’ve ever wondered why a (young person) you know is gung-ho to save endangered animals and even stress while simultaneously advocating abortion, postmodernity offers a reason why.” (Zafren 2)

In our society, no one has to “understand” his faith as long as feels strongly about it.

B. Absolute truth is gone, no god is supreme and all beliefs are accepted.

■ Josh McDowell writes, “As a Bible-believing adult, you undoubtedly accept some things to be absolutely and universally true; that is, true for all people, in all places, and at all times. You also accept that these absolutes are determined by God and communicated to us through His Word.”

However...“Truth to a postmodern world is *created* rather than *discovered*, each culture determines its own truth that is true only in and for that culture. Postmodernist contend that anyone who claims to hold an objective truth that unfavorably judges the values, beliefs,

or lifestyle of another person is intolerant and bigoted.” (McDowell 17)

Ironically, the one thing that the men at Mars Hill intellect could not remove was the fear of the unknown god.

III. BLIND SEARCHING HAS GIVEN WAY TO TOTAL ACCEPTANCE (v. 23b).

A. Many Americans have begun the search for God blindfolded.

Although, by their own admission, Americans lack understanding and do not know what is right, with outstretched arms they are ready to embrace whatever they find on their “spiritual journey.”

■ In an article entitled, “What is Postmodernism and Why Should We Care?,” Timothy Keller writes this:

During the last three decades, an era has emerged that many people are calling “post-modern.” The post-modern credo is that neither reason nor revelation give us objective truth. Post-moderns will say instead that all truth claims are socially constructed and arise when people groups and communities weave stories or narratives which give their community meaning and identity. Therefore, all truth claims are really fictional stories that “work” for such a group. So “truth” is always in quotation marks.

There are multiple, changeable truths. There are no essential principles, only contextual concepts. There is no inner essence, only surfaces and image. There are no boundaries, only combinations and connections. There is no grand or “meta-narrative,” only multiple story lines. We don’t have reality, but “virtual” reality. (Zafren 3)

B. That which the world blindly esteems, is in reality, the true God.

Ultimately humanity, either through philosophers or religion, has always been on a search for meaning. The Athenians searched for meaning through much the same way. The “unknown god” statue stood as a testimony to the fact that they had not found that for which they had searched. Paul’s message proclaimed that the one they ignorantly worshipped was the one who could give their life meaning.

America has obviously not found satisfaction in its search. Our message should point out the fact that we have that which they are searching for.

CONCLUSION

I was speaking to a medical doctor not too long ago and he made the statement that he did not discuss religion because “religious beliefs are intangible” and there is no way to prove one’s belief. I disagree completely. Everything about an authentic faith is “tangible,” the life changes, the peace, the joy, the deliverance from sin. An authentic faith can be measured, felt, passed on, and seen in everyday life.

The fact is that we have been given such a faith through Jesus Christ that it demands a voice in our life. I will go so far as to say that it (faith) cannot be, unless it is allowed to speak. The truth is that *conditions* in our society are crying out for such a faith.

References

McDowell, Josh. The Disconnected Generation. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000.

Zafren, Keith. Why A Church for a Postmodern Generation of Seekers?
16 March 1997 <<http://www.the-river.org/messages>>

AN OLD STORY FOR A NEW WORLD

© Mark Beard

Text: Acts 17:24-33

■ In the early days of the Tennessee Valley project a dilapidated homestead was going to be torn down. They were damming the river and the valley would be flooded out. A new split-level ranch was built for the Appalachian family on the hillside to relocate to.

The day of the flooding arrived and the bulldozers were there to tear down the old house. The family refused to move out of the old homestead. Finally out of desperation, a social worker was called in to find out what the problem was. “We ain’t goin’ anywhere” was the reply. The social worker pleaded with them to tell her what the problem was and why they would not move into their beautiful new home.

“See that fire over there?” the man asked, pointing to a blazing fire in the primitive hearth of the log cabin. “My grandpa built that fire over a hundred years ago,” the man explained. “He never let it go out, for he had no matches and it was a long way to the neighbor’s. Then my pa tended the fire, and since he died, I’ve tended it. None of us ever let it die, and I ain’t a-goin’ to move away and let grandpa’s fire go out!”

The social worker got an idea. She arranged for a large apple butter kettle to be delivered to the home. The hot coals would be scooped up and transported to the new home, kindling would be added and the grandfather’s fire would never go out.

The Appalachian family accepted and moved up to the split-level ranch on the hillside after they knew that they would have the fire of their ancestors. (Cooper 1)

It is odd how we continue to stand at the crossroads of change trying to hold onto the familiar and assuring ideas of the past, all the while finding ourselves pushed forward into a new world that challenges everything we hold dear. I suppose there are some ideas that we need to let go of, but our faith in Jesus Christ is not one of them.

In this passage it is not Paul who is being pushed but rather it is he who is doing the pushing. But in this case he was not preaching a new doctrine but rather at the complete fulfillment of an old story. To bring his message home he literally starts at the beginning—of humanity.

I. THE TRUE GOD WAS NOT GIVEN LIFE BY MAN, BUT RATHER GAVE LIFE TO MAN (v. 24-25).

A. God is not an impersonal being.

For the philosophers of Athens, as with many today, God was more of an idea than a personal being. For the Christian, God is more of a person than an idea.

B. Paul preached accountability to a living God.

Paul was not interested in trying to intrigue them with knowledge. He gets right to the point and tells them that if God created us then we are accountable to Him. If He is the source of all life then there can be no divided devotion—which is a trademark of postmodern thinking.

II. THE TRUE GOD IS THE ETERNAL ARCHITECT AND FATHER OF ALL THINGS (v. 26-27a).

A. There is a “community” to God’s creation (v. 26).

“From one man he made every nation of men...” We began as God’s new family. He ordained how we should live. His desire was for us to know Him and to serve Him. We were to be His people and He was to be our God. That remains His goal for humanity.

B. It is God’s desire that humanity as a whole would find Him.

■ Most postmodern seekers, particularly young people, believe in an impersonal God and human superficiality. Although many modernist thinkers who have not become atheists or deists don’t follow a personal God, they still believe in one who exists, but simply cannot be proven. Alcoholics Anonymous capitalized on this years ago in naming Him a “higher power”—less exclusive than “God,” but just as personal.

Postmodern people tend to believe more in the Eastern concept of God as an impersonal life force in all people and things. Right? Sound familiar? Part of the resurgent success of Star Wars is a generation of young people who easily accept and long to experience the Eastern concept of The Force in these movies.

This impersonal God concept has also led many Postmoderns to give up the modern thinking of people evolving to a better or higher state. The cynicism of Postmodernism has led many to believe that humans are actually no more inherently valuable than, say, animals or trees.

Perhaps you can see already the immense challenge for the church here...and why quoting Bible verses as authoritative proof texts to a postmodern young person means nothing and that modern, deductive, or logical arguments against things like abortion or mercy-killing fall on deaf ears. (Zafren 5)

Never the less, no matter how society changes its belief system we must never abandon our faith. The present mindset of America has shown up in various cultures throughout history, but the Gospel or the Good News, has remained the same.

III. THE TRUE GOD SEEKS TO REVEAL HIMSELF TO HUMANITY (vv. 27b-29).

A. Jesus Christ was God's perfect revelation of Himself to humanity.

■ Someone wrote, "If we can live one day with Jesus, we can live every day with Him, each one as it comes. Immanuel, a name for Christ, means "God with us." Human life was meant to be dramatic. We are meant to be God-inhabited. Our religion is not organized around keeping God at a distance. It allows us to go see him when we want. If I really want God to be with me, then my life will be extremely different from ordinary human life. The outcome will be far greater than the efforts." (Trobisch, Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom)

B. We must find common ground on which we can reveal God (vv. 28-29).

To many in our postmodern world, especially the youth, experiences are as real as any theological argument. Paul uses the Athenians own beliefs to draw them in. Notice his language, *“For in Him we live and move and have our being.”* Paul is relating the experiential dimension to these skeptics as well as to the intellectuals.

This is one reason why the Pentecostal message is seen as more relevant than the message of most orthodox churches.

■ Jackie David Johns explains, “Pentecostalism is more an impetus for than a consequence of an emerging dominant worldview. Pentecostalism should then be viewed as a part of the mainstream that is forging the postmodern era.

First, Pentecostalism may indeed represent a particular worldview and/or vision, but it clearly is not the product of a scientific paradigm. Pentecostalism emerged simultaneously among a variety of peoples around the world. There were no theorists who constructed Pentecostalism as a plausible response to the failure of other systems. Indeed, Pentecostalism took the world, especially the academic world, by surprise. Indications are that it took its early participants by surprise as well.

Secondly, it has been thoroughly demonstrated that Pentecostalism is rooted in the holiness movement of the late nineteenth century... It seems readily apparent that Pentecostalism emerged out of and as an expression of a counterculture. Persons of the holiness revivals and early Pentecostalism existed outside of the dominant cultural vision.

Pentecostalism and the holiness movement from which it came reflect an alternative worldview, one that springs from the insights of John Wesley... Wesleyans and Pentecostals hold to Scripture, church tradition, reason and experience as authoritative guides to faith while God alone serves as the basis of faith.” (Johns 85-86)

IV. THE TRUE GOD DESIRES THAT ALL SHOULD KNOW HIM (vv. 30-33).

A. God's ultimate offer to humanity is an encounter with Himself (v.30).

■ Unfortunately, Lloyd John Ogilvie was right when he said, "The institutional church in America is filled with religious people who desperately need an experience of the living, holy, forgiving, gracious God." (Ogilvie, Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom)

■ At the heart of being a Christian is a personal encounter with God in Christ that shapes and mold us. On the basis of this encounter, we seek to bring into an understandable whole the diverse strands of our personal lives by appeal to certain categories. Prominent among these are "sin" and "grace," "alienation" and "reconciliation," "helplessness" and "divine power," "having been lost" but "now being saved." It is in this context of making sense out of life by means of recounting the story of a transformative religious experience that doctrinal propositions find their importance. (Grenz 170)

Simply put, without a real personal experience with God, doctrine is dead.

B. The resurrection of Jesus Christ leaves us without excuse.

Our lives should reveal the value of knowing God.

CONCLUSION

■ If we want to understand and minister to this generation, postmodernity is our starting point because from now on, the way this and following generations will look at and process truth will change the way we communicate and reason with people. The old styles of preaching and teaching will need to be modified and replaced by new approaches to telling the "old, old story." (Zafren 7)

Methods will change but neither the message or the goal must change. *To experience God, to fellowship with Him, to serve Him, this is our goal and our message.*

■ Think of it this way, “The air which our body requires envelops us on every hand. The air of itself seeks to enter our bodies and, for this reason, exerts pressure upon us. It is well known that it is more difficult to hold one's breath than it is to breathe. We need but exercise our organs of respiration, and air will enter forthwith into our lungs and perform its life-giving function to the entire body. The air which our souls need also envelops all of us at all times and on all sides. God is round about us in Christ on every hand, with his many-sided and all-sufficient grace. All we need to do is to open our hearts.” (Hallesby, Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom)

References

- Cooper, Jordan. Developing an Ancient/Future Faith. 14 October 2000
<<http://www.jordancooper.sk.ca/sermon-ancientfuturefaith.html>>
- Grenz, Stanley J. A Primer on Postmodernism. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
- Hallesby, O. “Prayer.” Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom. Parsons Technology, 1998.
- Johns, Jackie David. “Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview.” Journal of Pentecostal Theology, 7 (1995), 73-96.
- Ogilvie, Lloyd John. Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom. Parsons Technology, 1998.
- Trobisch, Ingrid. “The Confident Woman.” Bible Illustrator 3: CD-Rom. Parsons Technology, 1998.
- Zafren, Keith. Why A Church For A Postmodern Generation of Seekers? 14 October 2000 <<http://www.the-river.org/messages>>

