

## Change Your Job Description: Reaching Postmodernists for Christ

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“Teachers will fill lamps and clean lamp chimneys. Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day’s session. A teacher will make her pens carefully, whittling nibs to the individual taste of the pupils. Teachers will sweep the floor every day after school and scrub it with hot, soapy water once a week.” These duties were part of job descriptions for teachers in the rural Midwest in 1872!

The good news is that a schoolteacher no longer has to be an expert fire starter, lamp filler, floor sweeper, or pen maker. But on the other hand, a job description of today’s teacher stipulates that he or she “identifies pupil needs and cooperates with other professional staff members in assessing and helping pupils solve health, attitude, and learning problems . . . administers group standardized tests in accordance with district testing program . . . shows a mastery of the necessary recordkeeping, word processing, desktop publishing, and other computer software necessary for effective instruction.”

The pioneer schoolmarm would certainly be unable to meet the needs of today’s instructors. As times change, so do the job descriptions of those of us who live and work during those times.

### **Entering a new classroom**

From the beginning, the job of a believer has been to “make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . and to “make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . and teaching them” (Matthew 28:19, 20). That has not changed. But as times *do* change, the duties necessary to accomplish that goal certainly have.

For us Christians who were in adulthood in the late 1980s, we may feel like a schoolmarm who finds herself transported into a 21st century classroom. We try to bank the fires of evangelism, fill the lamps of biblical wisdom, and give others the benefit of our sharpened nibs of understanding. But our efforts are met with blank-faced curiosity if not outright rejection.

Something has changed.

Indeed it has. While terms like *modernism* and *postmodernism* are not always easy to define, they are helpful in understanding our new philosophical environs. Sometime in the last fifth of the 20th century, thinking shifted from the former to the latter. Modernism, a scientific, rationalistic view of the world that had been dominant since the end of the 18th century, is no longer the lens through which those 20 years or more our junior see life. In its place is a much more mystical, more ambiguous worldview known as postmodernism.

Note that neither modernism nor postmodernism is a biblical worldview. They are simply the “schoolhouses” one must enter in order to bring the gospel to those who need it. Like the 19th century schoolmarm who must enter the 21st century classroom, Christians today who wish to reach a postmodern culture must be willing to change their job descriptions. We must alter our approaches in order to educate our students. Let’s consider a few examples.

### **Be a switchboard operator, not a stenographer.**

Postmodernists process information much differently than do modernists. Modernists value the work of a stenographer. The steno transcribes the words of another and recites them line by line, paragraph by paragraph. We can teach modernists effectively by giving them point-by-point sermons filled with authoritative, word-for-word quotes from reliable sources. We then set them loose on the world with “Five Keys to Better Communication” or “Six Secrets of a Happy Home.”

Postmodernists process information more like an old-fashioned telephone switchboard operator. Information comes in from a variety of lines. They then handle information from disparate sources, switching quickly from one to another. Using another analogy, information is best presented to moderns by a conveyor belt and to postmodernists with a dump truck!

Modernists go to their physician for authoritative information. Postmodernists go to WebMD.com and sort through opinions of medical professionals and patients alike. Modernists trust the *Encyclopedia Britannica* with its articles written by experts. Postmodernists go to Wikipedia.com, a massive, online, ever-changing encyclopedia with articles constantly being written and rewritten by users of the reference. Modernists watch the nightly news. Postmodernists blog, reading the opinions and responses of others and having the opportunity to respond themselves.

Teachers of postmodernists are more effective when we teach in discussion oriented “switchboard” classes rather than giving straightforward, point-by-point dictation. Parents in ancient Israel were not told to sit their children down and give them a lecture on the “Five Main Truths of the Passover.” They were to engage their children in dialogue about one of their most sacred celebrations when the children asked about it (Deuteronomy 6:20-25).

### **Be a country doctor, not a chief surgeon.**

A chief surgeon is an icon of modernism. Although he may perform few surgeries himself, he handles only the most difficult and delegates the rest to those he supervises. He saves the world, often without putting on his gloves.

The country doctor, in contrast, is a postmodern hero. He handles every situation in his community whether it be a cracked rib or a chest cold. He knows his patients personally, having treated some of them all of their lives. He does not save the world. But he makes a difference in his corner of it.

Modernists believe that saving the world is possible. They believe bigger is better, even though it may be more impersonal. A hefty check for world missions demonstrates to modernists that the job is being done.

Postmodernists are not so idealistic. Science has not given us the “alabaster cities . . . undimmed by human tears” anticipated by the very modernist patriotic anthem, “America the Beautiful.” In fact, they see the need and suffering in gritty urban areas.

Postmodernists are not impressed by the impersonal check to world missions, but value being a part of short-term mission projects. We can reach postmodernists not by claiming to save the world, but by being service-oriented bodies and by inviting them to show allegiance to Jesus by offering “a cup of cold water” to the overlooked “little ones” all around us (Matthew 10:42).

### **Be a movie usher, not a film critic.**

The rationalistic, scientific mindset of modernism considers the arts to be diversions at best. Postmodernists, in contrast, are immersed in popular culture, especially music and movies.

In reaching moderns, the role of critic or media watchdog was appropriate. Having a person of authority comment on a song or film and bark a warning to others not to waste their time or money fits well with a rationalistic view of the arts.

Let us consider instead taking the role of a movie usher. We walk into a crowded theater and the usher can show us a seat from which we can have a clear view. He or she has seen the film several times, and before it starts can share an opinion or two if we ask. When we take the role of an usher, we show familiarity with popular culture and help lead someone to have an unobstructed biblical view. The minister of my home congregation once preached a series of sermons on the family, opening each message with a clip from the animated film *The Incredibles*. Taking the role of an usher, he led the congregation from the common ground of pop cinema to the higher ground of how the film agreed and disagreed with the revealed truth of God’s Word.

Focus on the Family's *Plugged In* and Donald Wildman's *AFA Journal* are still very effective with modernists, warning about the non-biblical teaching of modern media. Postmodernists, however, may shun them in favor of Hollywoodjesus.com or Cinemainfocus.com, "movie usher" Web sites that are much more media positive while remaining uncompromisingly biblical. Let us remember that when on Mars Hill, the apostle Paul did not quote two pagan paeans to the false god Zeus in order to condemn their poetry. He used popular culture to show how the artists grasped a truth he would explain further (Acts 17:24-31).

President John F. Kennedy observed, "History is a relentless master. It has no present, only the past rushing into the future. To try to hold fast is to be swept aside." We cannot hold on to the past. Postmodern thought will no more go away than will the one-room schoolhouse return as the educational norm. As Christians wanting to reach postmodernists for Jesus, we need to rethink our roles and change our job descriptions without losing a word of eternal truth.

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