

7 ESSENTIALS FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM – 9/23/99

In trying to figure out the most tactful way to approach people with the gospel it helps if we understand the culture a bit. Although it is different now, when we first went to Russia the handing out of tracts was discouraged because that was the method used by the Communists to hand out propaganda. Quite a difference in culture from what we were used to. The same thing is true here also, in reaching into our own communities. We need to understand our own culture and unfortunately unless we put forth some effort, most of us don't. We tend to live in our own "comfort zone." We gravitate toward "our" music, we talk "our" language, and we tend to think that the way we do things is the best way, although "our" way may be a couple of decades old.

In the interest of examining the culture we live in rather than the one we grew up in, I would like to draw your attention to seven "facts of life" that describe where we live today. You might consider these seven essentials to understand for entering the new millennium with the gospel, in answer to the question, "what kind of world do we live in today?"

We live in a "niche" world. Everyone is looking for and targeting a niche, a segment of the population or special group of people. Soft drink commercials are aimed at age groups. Some supermarkets in large cities are advertising "singles night." Music in the store and specials on single-serving frozen dinners highlight the event. Car commercials, television programming, and insurance policies are all aimed at specific target groups. People are losing their excitement about large shopping malls and small boutique shops with personal service are increasing. You can go to a shop that manicures, a store for balloons, a coffee shop, or a kitchen utensil store. These are individual entrepreneurs who have isolated a need and addressed it with quality and service.

Such an approach is not unbiblical. Some today have voiced the opinion that the gospel ought always to be presented in generic fashion for all ages at all times in all situations. That makes it easy on them when people don't respond. "It's the listener's fault," they say, "I preached the truth!" Such reasoning is simplistic and unreasonable. Paul said he became "all things to all men that he might by all means win some." When he spoke to Jews in the synagogues he quoted scriptures and appealed to Jesus as the Messiah. When he was in Athens speaking to gentiles he quoted contemporary literature and appealed to logic, justice, and evidence of Jesus as the one living God. He targeted his audience. He, by the Holy Spirit, spoke directly to the people who were listening.

Learning from that scriptural method, what group(s) should we target? Where is our niche? The truth is that Jesus has something for everyone, so where is the need? In our culture the family is under fire. Homes are struggling, marriages are dissolving, kids

are floundering. Perhaps publicly announced and well-prepared studies on parenting, teens, family relationships, or marriage building might not be out of line. These are needs which the gospel addresses. There are other options.

A multitude of problems in the home can be addressed by teaching people to trust Jesus and His directions on how to govern ourselves. This can be done during real Biblical counseling sessions. Counseling is an area that churches of Christ in many areas have steered clear of, but true Biblical counseling is a cure for a bushel of sinful ills and can be an advertised “niche” to reach into a community.

Because of our culture, more congregations are gathering in more divorced, widowed, unmarried, and otherwise single people. As this group grows, their special needs can and should be addressed. As our population ages the “senior” group of healthy, active retirees grows. How are we encouraging them to serve and be active for the Lord? We will comment more on some solutions to this problem later.

Special classes, special studies, clearly identified work efforts and great appreciation are all part of identifying and targeting various segments of our community for contact with the gospel. Instead of requiring our community to be like us, isn't it about time that we stopped long enough to see what they are really like, to speak to their concerns, and address the problems they are facing on a daily basis. We live in a “niche” world. It is time to stop being so generic that we look like a spiritual WalMart trying to reach everyone with everything and not really doing a good job of it. We need to start identifying goals, patterns, and targets to put the gospel in contact with those who are interested.

(Part 2 to follow)

Carl McMurray