

5 THINGS

Every 21st Century

Christian
Must
Know



by
Branch Pastoral Team

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5 THINGS EVERY 21ST CENTURY CHRISTIAN MUST KNOW



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Chapter One

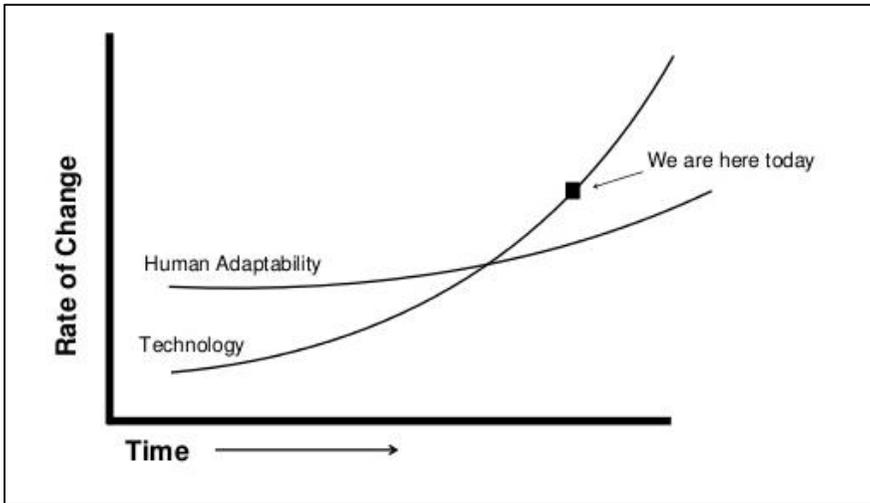
Why History Matters

Chuck Allers

Two new norms for twenty-first century Western culture are both the constant nature of change in society, and the accelerated nature at which that change occurs. In 2016, author Thomas Friedman stated that “the rate of technological change is now accelerating so fast that it has risen above the average rate at which most people can absorb all these changes.”¹

¹ Thomas L. Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late* (New York: Picador, 2016), 34.

His point is illustrated in this graph:²



Any pace that outstrips your ability to absorb it, or make practical sense of it, can leave you unsure, anxious and frustrated. And yet, while Friedman suggested that the key to success was to accelerate the human capacity to innovate, there is another more proven source through which you can better interpret and adapt to change. It is history.

Learning *about* history is indeed helpful for charting the course of your future, because you can learn *from* history. Take the words of Winston Churchill (1874-1965), an English politician who navigated the changes of the twentieth century. He said, “the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” Why is this considered to be true? Well, it authenticates what another leader from antiquity, Israel’s King Solomon (931-990 BCE), stated as he pondered life:

“That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, ‘see, this

² Ibid, page 36.

is new'? It has already been in ancient times before us."
– Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

Therefore, since the Bible instructs that human history has an inherent tendency to repeat itself, the best way to see forward, as Churchill stated, is to look backward—look to the past as a means to successfully understand the future. For example, in regard to technological change (such as the new digital world in which we live at present), the Internet of the fifteenth century was the printing press. As the Western world adapted to the massive change this innovative technology instituted, it allowed the church to think more biblically, as the printed word afforded a larger audience to both read and interact with God's word.

Politically, much like today's debate about the extent of separation between church and state, as the American colonies of the eighteenth century removed the influence of a state-sponsored church denomination from their political sphere, it allowed the church to become entrepreneurs rather than state-funded organizations. What ensued was a great period of church growth and evangelical influence upon North America.

How about divisive social issues, much like the ones we experience today? On the one hand, while the issue of African slavery began in division and ended in war in America, due to the determined and rational influence of Christian politicians like William Wilberforce (1759-1833), this pernicious trade was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833 without a shot being fired. And, on the other hand, as the baby boomers changed the cultural language of America in the 1960s, Christian leaders, such as Chuck Smith (1927-2013) changed with it, and thus the relevant preaching of the gospel created the last great Christian

awakening in America—the *Jesus Movement*—and impacted a generation of people.

So history, for the sake of today, matters today, for as you learn *about* history, and how Christian men and women navigated the many and swift changes in their culture, you will, in fact, learn *from* history and be able to implement wise changes and adaptations to our rapidly changing culture.

Chapter Two

How to Reach a Postmodern Culture

Matthew Marzec

How do we as Christians effectively reach the postmodern culture that surrounds us? Step #1—stop calling our culture postmodern. It's not!

Let's take a step back to understand what postmodernism means. This can be a surprisingly difficult task, because there really is no one thing that is postmodernism. Rather, there is a diverse group of postmodern thinkers. This coupled with the vagueness often surrounding discussions of postmodernism makes the concept difficult to flesh out.

Nonetheless, there are key and common threads. The main one is that postmodernism rejects that we have direct access to reality. People construct their own reality, in a sense, through language. Thus, different language communities have different realities.

In line with this, postmodernism centers on narrative or story, rather than truth. One community may have its narrative and another its own—neither is true or false—the stories are merely different. To claim that one narrative is true broadly is either false or meaningless.

But does this accurately represent the stance of our culture? Not fully. Imagine the following scenarios.

You claim that climate change and the action being taken to combat it is misguided. Thus, you refuse to take part. Will our culture accept that as your narrative? Certainly not! You will quickly be denounced as wrong and the experts (i.e. scientists) will be cited as evidence of that. The destruction of the planet, through climate inaction, is the objective reality that we are all said to face.

Similarly, imagine showing skepticism towards Darwin's model of evolution. Is that simply your truth? No way! That too is settled science, remember? Once again, the denier is out of touch with reality.

The point being, when you dig past the surface of our culture, one generally finds that people accept the existence of objective, knowable truth when it comes to the matters of the hard disciplines (science, math, engineering, etc.). It is only in certain areas that knowledge and universally binding truth is met with skepticism (religion, ethics, and values).

But postmodernism makes no such distinction. As it turns out, this way of thinking is actually modernism. The modernist elevates scientific knowledge as superior and, denounces religious type claims as

superficial, because of their belief that knowledge can only come from the five senses.¹ Our culture is distinctly modern.

This is significant because Christians have overreacted to the influence of postmodernism. In the belief that culture has given up on objective truth altogether, the shift has been to emphasize narrative over belief, and story over reason. A prominent view has developed that the only effective way to win others to Christianity is to share your Christian story and invite others to take part in it. More importantly, many have deemed reason, evidence, and argument ineffective because of the belief that truth is no longer valued.

The problem with this approach is threefold. First, this leaves little reason for preferring one narrative over another. What if someone does not want to participate in the Christian story? It does not work for them or they have had bad experiences with the church. Should we still recommend Christianity to them? Why?

Second, Christianity is not ultimately about participating in a useful story—it is about reality. If God does not exist and Jesus is not raised—independent of anyone’s beliefs or language communities—then our participation is futile (1 Cor. 15:14). If Christianity is not objectively true it has nothing for us. Regardless of cultural trends, we ought not ever lose sight of this.

Third, given this point, we have abandoned our best and most effective weapons. Narrative can be useful, but at the most foundational level we do not need story so much as we need reason and evidence. Why? Because reason and evidence are what get us at what reality is like. And Christianity is reality. God does exist, and Jesus is resurrected

¹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 18.

(period!)—no qualifications necessary. People need to know this. Irrespective of a person's experience, they ought to be Christian because there are massive and dangerous consequences to missing out on reality.

Here is how we reach our culture, wherever they may fall: point them to the objective truth of the Christian belief system. For this task, we must not abandon our tools of reason, evidence, and argument.

Chapter Three

How to Engage Generation Z

Adam Goodman

Before we can engage with Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), it is vital to understand them. Here are three key cultural challenges to keep in mind before engaging generation Z.

First, unlike any other generation, Gen Z has grown up on Wifi, smart phones, and social media.¹ Not only that, but they grew up with their parents utilizing the aforementioned as well. This is one of the main reasons why Gen Z does not think it is rude to be on their phones while they're with a group of people or at the dinner table. Furthermore, they

¹ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*, (New York: Atria Paperback, 2018), 51

find most of their relationships happening through their smartphones and social media platforms, including their most trusted friends, and their most menacing bullies.

Second, terrorism, both globally and locally has always been a part of their young lives. They are considered “post 9/11,” at the very least, their memories are post 9/11. The tragic happenings that day are minimized to stories in their history books. However, the drastic effects have formed a part of their lives. They grew up hearing about school shootings through the news and Reddit posts, which suddenly became very personal when they began running drills for potential school shootings at their school.

Third, they went through a recession in some of their most formative years.² This has made them more frugal than millennials and far more anxious about having a financially stable future. A typical Gen Zer will have money from last year’s birthday or store up an allowance for months.

It is not surprising then that Gen Z is found to be the loneliest, most anxious and most depressed generation we have seen in decades.³ Before we can begin to reach this generation, we must first desire to understand the challenges they have faced so early in their lives. We must be careful not to dismiss their culturally crafted tendencies or dismiss their feelings of anxiety and depression. Instead, we must learn to sympathize with them and meet them where they are at in their walk of life. Therefore, I propose three ways to reach Gen Z.

² James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 39.

³ Sean McDowell, J. Warner Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2019), 57.

3 Ways to Reach Gen Z

First, address loneliness. Gen Z has hundreds if not thousands of “friends” on their phones, yet they are identified as the loneliest generation. Why? People were not created to build relationships through screens. Sure, social media is amazing at connecting people and building surface level relationships, but it could never replace human interaction. Practically, you can spend time talking with them — in person. This may present some challenges, but one way to hold good conversations is to show genuine interest in their interests

Second, *show interest in their interests*, such as social media, Netflix, YouTube and video games. These are amongst the most popular (and most important) things to someone in Gen Z. Rather than dismissing these things as something innately negative, engage in a conversation with someone in Gen Z *about* these things. Ask them who the most famous YouTuber is, or what Netflix show everyone is talking about, or what the newest trend is on *TikTok*, or what the most popular video game is right now. Then ask some follow-up questions (these answers will be very telling!). What do they think about that show or trend? Is it cool? Or do they think its lame? This can lead conversations into a lot of really fruitful directions. Most importantly, it will help you know how to relate to them.

Third, adjust *evangelism*. Religion is of little importance to Gen Z. They have the fastest growing population of “none’s” (no religious affiliation), and a *Barna* study concluded that only 4% of Gen Z holds a biblical worldview.⁴ One of the most crucial ways we need to adjust in

⁴ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*, (Ventura: Barna, 2019), 25.

our evangelism is to answer the tough questions the Christian worldview faces. Gen Z has information at their fingertips, and this has made them very cynical of dogmatic religious claims. With that, and from my personal experience, Gen Z is far more likely to hear someone out when there has been a trusting relationship built. It seems the cultural shift in evangelism has gone from big tent revivals, to meaningful conversations over a cup of coffee.

As Gen Z expert, Sean McDowell, stated, “take the time to listen with empathy, mentor from a place of wisdom, and demonstrate your concern and care for the young people you hope to influence. Prepare them for truth by gaining their trust.”⁵ Be patient with Gen Z and extend grace to them. It can sometimes take years to break through the barriers these young people have put up. They need the gospel just like every other generation, so let’s be sure to bring it to them in the way they are most likely to receive it.

⁵ McDowell and Wallace, *So the Next Generation Will Know*, 78.

Chapter Four

God's Purpose for Your Emotions

Rick Melenciano

Emotions are a major component of being made in the image of God. God himself experienced emotions: He delighted (Gen. 1:21), grieved (Gen. 6:6), and was anxious (John 12:27), to name a few. Since God, in His perfection, experienced emotions, it is clear that emotions are not inherently bad or sinful. God intentionally made human beings as emotional creatures and emotions are a major way that we relate to God *and* represent Him to others. Here is how we do that well.

Firstly, the proper understanding of a believer's identity is essential to responding to our circumstances and emotions in a godly way. This is because our identity provides the context for how to even

think about any situation we face. Identity can be thought of as the reason you matter. Why do you matter? This belief heavily influences your process of thought through your emotions. If your identity is in others making you happy, then you will experience crisis when this does not happen.

Another way to think of this is that your identity serves as the filter which you interpret all experiences; and once the experience is complete, you resolve to believe something about yourself. For example, “I was molested; no one can love a person who was molested; therefore, I am unlovable.” This is not logical nor true, yet a person’s mind can do this when the belief before the traumatic event was, “I matter because I am sexually pure.” This false belief will naturally lead to a false conclusion. However, if the belief was, “I matter not because of anything I’ve done, but because of what Christ has done for me,” (i.e. forgiveness of sins, freedom of guilt and shame, eternal life in Him, etc.), the occurrence of evil in a person’s life can be better understood as an inevitable aspect of human life but with hope for recovery from its effects, and that the reality of evil in no way diminishes the believer’s significance before God.

We must remember that the way we think invariably influences the way we feel.¹ Therefore, thinking correctly on our identities as followers of Christ begins the process of emotionally responding to our circumstances in a godly way.

¹ Collins, Gary R., *Christian Counseling A Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 132.

Secondly, we must realize that even as believers we may struggle with negative emotions (i.e. anxiety, depression, outburst of anger, shame, etc.). It is a mistake to think that God is not at work in a person's life, or that a believer is not representing God well to others because of his or her emotional battles. It's essential to once again see emotions as a component of being designed by God, but also, a component that has been affected by sin. Emotions are responses to circumstances, and at times, the circumstances can be visible. For example, a heated discussion you are having with a loved one over his or her lifestyle that you do not agree with. As tensions rise, you become increasingly angry.

Other times, circumstances may not be so obvious, such as a panic attack that seemed to come completely out of the blue. In either case, God can communicate to us through the circumstances of emotional difficulties. For example, if we desire to dwell in depression, it can indicate desperation for a sense of comfort in what is familiar. God can use this to communicate to us, not only that He is the source of comfort and power, but also to potentially reach out to others for help to cope with the difficulties of a situation we are facing.

Something has gone wrong when the only safe place for us is in our pool of depression, but ignoring our emotions in an effort to force ourselves to be more Christ-like is an ineffective long-term solution, and is ultimately a misrepresentation of Christ. To represent Christ well to others, we must learn to correctly address and work through our emotions.

Lastly, it's vitally important to remember that Christians do not have to be ruled by their emotions. Instead, we have the option to place our emotions under the Lordship of Christ. The Lordship of Christ in our own personal lives is aimed toward making us more Christ-like, and God

uses our individual struggles to produce this character development. This is what it means to place our emotions under His Lordship. At times, our emotions may conflict with biblical mandates, and the difficult work of God aligning our values with His is how transformation takes place.

For this there is no one-size-fits-all. Yes, at times, through prayer and various spiritual disciplines, we can allow the Holy Spirit access to all of our emotions and the deepest, darkest places in our hearts. In doing so, we allow His light to expose our sin and shame and set us apart from it. However, sometimes we do not find resolution solely via spiritual disciplines and more extensive measures that a pastor is unable to provide (i.e. therapy and or medication may be required). Dogmatic claims against these types of tools to achieve emotional healing miss the point that God's purpose for believers is that they would live out their identities in Him, under His Lordship.

Understanding that God's purpose for our emotions is to relate to Him and represent Him to others helps us to more fully express the image of God we were created in. Correcting emotional pitfalls and healing emotional wounds that come from the effects of sin can be a painful process, but ultimately gives us the freedom that God intended for those made in His image.

Chapter Five

How to Think About God

Sean Henschel

Meeet Jim, a young Christian man, who has fallen in love with a young Christian woman. Their relationship has been pure, and he comes to you after their engagement asking if it is God's will for him to marry her. He is afraid God is saying no and testing him after reading how God tested Abraham with his one and only son Isaac in Genesis 22. How are we to think about God in this situation?

Sally walks up to you with a serious look on her face. "I think God wants me to become a missionary in Japan." She explains, "I did what God told Ahaz (Isaiah 7:11); I asked the Lord for a sign of where I should

be a missionary and I saw the Japanese flag in three different places this week.” How are we to think about God in this situation?

What you think about God matters! It matters because what you think about God will dictate and affect your whole life. If you think God is angry with you all the time, then you will likely be scared of God and hide or rebel in anger. If you think God is only about grace, then you will likely minimize judgment and sin. If you think God is a coach, then you will likely act like a sports player trying to please the coach. We all have conceptions of God and these conceptions all have affects—positive and negative.

But where do these conceptions of God come from? From many places: our pastors, church communities, small groups, worship songs, devotionals, books, podcasts, experiences and so on. But how do we know if these conceptions of God are accurate? How do we know if the worship song we are singing is thinking correctly about God? How do we know if the devotional is giving an accurate application for walking with God?

The answer to these questions and the examples above is **we must think about God biblically**. God has personally revealed Himself in Scripture and it is there where our thoughts of God must be formed, checked and challenged. I propose two ways to begin thinking biblically.

First, we must think about God as He has revealed Himself and His will in the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation. It can be hazardous to pull out one verse or passage, isolate it from the whole story and then form thoughts about God and His will. Here is where Jim’s thoughts of God faltered. He read God’s command to Abraham in Genesis 22 in isolation from God’s more direct teaching about marriage for the believer in the New Testament; specifically, 1 Corinthians 7. This

passage highlights the freedom to marry anyone as long as they belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39). Therefore, Jim has freedom to choose as long as she is a believer. Thinking about God and marriage from Genesis to Revelation (or canonically) gives a more complete picture of God's will for marriage today.

Second, we must process God's interactions and commands with people in Scripture through a *descriptive* and *prescriptive* lens. Some passages of Scripture are descriptive in that God's specific interactions and commands are only in regard to a specific person(s) (like Abraham being tested to sacrifice his son in Genesis 22). Others are prescriptive in that the passage of Scripture is prescribing how people everywhere "ought" to think or respond like in John 3:16. This is where Sally faltered. She read God's descriptive interactions with Ahaz and then translated them to her situation. What Sally needs is a contextual understanding of Isaiah 7:1-17 coupled with a biblical understanding of "signs" from Genesis to Revelation (called a word study) to get a better idea of descriptive and prescriptive uses.

In Isaiah 7 the Lord's sign was given to confirm His promise that He would protect Judah from two kings. It would be a far stretch to take the Lord's specific promise and interaction with Ahaz and turn it into a prescriptive teaching or accurate measure for New Covenant Christians regarding directional "signs" for ministry. We must be careful not to take every interaction God has with someone and expect it to be the way God will operate with us. Further a word study of "signs" in the New Testament continuously points to miraculous confirmations of Jesus Christ and His message of salvation. Signs were not given in the New Testament to make daily decisions in life, but to make the most important decision of all—faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Sally ought to

be encouraged to examine more biblical teaching regarding gifts and qualifications rather than asking God for a random object to point her in the right direction.

What you think about God matters! Therefore, begin by thinking biblically and do not simply receive teaching about God without checking the Bible yourself. Interestingly, even the Apostle Paul's teaching was examined in the Scriptures to see if it was true (see Acts 17:11-12). How much more us!

Conclusion

The world is changing rapidly! Today, Christians face both challenges common to all ages and ones never seen before. In light of this, we must be prepared comprehensively. This can be a daunting task, so we have laid out five key areas of focus any 21st century believer must know: 1) history, 2) how to effectively reach culture with truth, 3) the next generation, 4) how to process emotions, and 5) how to think properly about God. This is not a one-day task, but a life's mission.

Here at the Branch Church our focus is to equip you in these areas and beyond. We invite you to join us in this process Sunday mornings and throughout the week. Let us take our calling seriously, so that we can properly represent Christ to the world. We look forward to knowing you and helping you grow in your relationship with Christ.

About the Authors

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Chuck serves at the Branch Church on the pastoral staff and has been in fulltime pastoral ministry for thirty years. He currently serves as an advisor to the next generation of leaders who now shepherd the Branch, and is also an adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific, Veritas International, and Calvary Chapel Universities. He holds two post-graduate degrees – a D.Min in Spiritual Leadership (1999) and a PhD in Islamic Studies (2011), and is the author of *Anwar Ibrahim: Evolution of a Muslim Democrat* (2014). He and his wife, Greta, have been married for twenty-six years.

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