**BIBLE TALK Radio Broadcast**

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**Jesus In The Modern World**

I would like to begin today by referring to an article written by William Willimon. Back several years ago he wrote an article entitled, “This Culture is Overrated, Why it's dangerous to want to relate the gospel to the modern world.” In this article he mentions that he was leading a group of preachers in a discussion about their preaching. He asked them, “What areas would you like help with in your preaching?" most responded with:

—"I want help in making connection with my listeners, relating the gospel to their everyday lives."

—"I want to preach sermons that really hit my people where they live."

—"I want to preach in a way that is real, that addresses real-life concerns people have." In summary he observed that they “wanted to preach in a way that addressed their culture.” He goes on to say that at one time he would have agreed that one of the primary purposes of preaching was to relate the gospel to contemporary culture. But now he believes it is our weakness not our strength. And he said, “In leaning over to speak to the modern world, I fear we may have fallen in.”

Willimon goes on to say in the article, “Most of the preaching I have heard in my own church family struggles to relate the gospel to the modern world. When we sought to use our sermons to build a bridge from the old world of the Bible to the new, modern world, the traffic was moving only in one direction on that bridge. It was always the modern world rummaging about in Scripture, saying things like, ‘This relates to me,’ or, ‘I'm sorry, this is really impractical,’ or, ‘I really can't make sense out of that.’ It was always the modern world telling the Bible what's what.

But this way of preaching fails to do justice to the rather imperialistic claims of Scripture. The Bible doesn't want to *speak* tothe modern world; the Bible wants to *convert* the modern world.” (end of quote)

This is so true. There is a temptation for preachers and churches to say and do those things that will be accepted by the community in which they live. We want acceptance. We would like to be able to speak to the people of our culture and have them respond in this way, “That’s what I always thought.” “You have said it so well. That is exactly what my feeling on the matter is.”

But that has its problems. We end up saying what they like to hear, but do not give them the truth they need to hear. Again, the intentions of Jesus were not to speak to and relate with the modern world, but to convert the modern world.

We would do well to keep in mind that the world in which Jesus lived was the “modern world” of His day. It was as modern as humanity had been. The modern world is the conception of things while we are alive. It is our culture. It is the way our world looks at things at the present time. The modern world in which Jesus lived had their misconceptions and Jesus did not try to fit in, but He tried to change their way of thinking.

Consider with me a couple of examples: In John chapter 3:1-12 we read of Jesus speaking to Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a modern man. He was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Jewish council, no doubt a successful man. He comes to Jesus by night and said to Him, *"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."* He says, “We know,” probably referring to some in the council. They knew He was a teacher come from God, but they were not His disciples. Later Jesus said, in speaking to Nicodemus, *“We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.”* (v. 11) At this time Nicodemus was not a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus began to speak to Him about being born again, but Nicodemus did not understand. *“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’”* (vs. 3-6) Nicodemus was thinking of physical birth. But Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to think differently about things. Jesus is talking about a spiritual birth, and He uses the metaphor of a birth that indicates a total change in Nicodemus. In other words if Nicodemus, or any man or woman is to enter the kingdom of God he must begin a new life, a new way of thinking and new way of living. He must be born again. Jesus did not water it down by saying, “Let me tell you of a few changes you need to make.” Jesus said he needed to be born again, a total and complete change.

Nicodemus does not understand. In verse 9 it says, *“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’” “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” (vs. 10-12)

Now Jesus does not try to fit in to Nicodemus’s way of thinking to win him over, but he is trying to get Nicodemus to change his way of thinking. And if Nicodemus truly believes that Jesus is a teacher come from God, he will be willing to learn and change his thinking.

A young preacher said, when gathered with other preachers, “we are preaching things that people don’t understand at all. People who come off the street into our assemblies don’t understand a thing we are doing.” And he thought that was a tragedy. The thinking of people like this young preacher is that we need to change what we are doing and what we are teaching so the world can understand. The people who heard Jesus speak in the first century didn’t understand what He was talking about either. And we shouldn’t be surprised that people today who are worldly in their thinking are not able to identify with and understand the teaching of heaven. I know we would like all the people who come in and hear our preaching to say, “This is just how it ought to be.” “I like this.” But why would we expect that? Let me illustrate. If I were to take a aerospace engineering class at Missouri S & T, it would be the first aerospace engineering class I have ever taken. I would not expect to walk into that class and have an immediate grasp of what was going on. It would be necessary for me to learn a new vocabulary. I would have to learn a new set of conceptions. Until that happened, I would not get it. And today, when a worldly minded person comes into our assemblies he will not immediately comprehend all that we teach and do. He needs to be taught. And if he is willing to learn then he will come to understand.

Let us look at another example. In John chapter 6, verses 1-14, we read of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five barley loaves and two small fish. Verses 14 and 15 says, *“Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone.”* What do you think the people were thinking when they saw the sign? They were probably thinking, “If we had a king like this then our working days are over. We will never have to worry again about food and drink and the necessities of life. Let’s make him our king.” And so they were about to take him by force and make Him king. But Jesus would not be their king of bread. The next day the people find Him on the other side of the sea and Jesus said to them, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.”* (vs. 26, 27) Jesus is teaching them to think differently than the way they have been thinking. In verse 35 Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life.”* In verses 41-42 the Jews complained. It says, *“The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven.’ And they said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?’”* Jesus further teaches them. Their response in verse 60, *“This is a hard saying; who can understand it?”*  Jesus gives explanation in verses 61-64. Verse 66 says, *“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more.”* Was Jesus a failure? Should He have taught them that which was more palatable to their way of thinking? No. Jesus taught them exactly what they needed to hear. But they were interpreting Jesus on the basis of their own preconceived ideas. For them to understand they had to open their hearts with the desire to understand what Jesus was teaching. Their conceptions had to be changed. Their values had to be changed. Jesus was not about to water down his teaching to fit their way of thinking.

Neither should we water down Jesus’ teaching in order to get more people into our churches. The only word that will save people is the gospel of Christ. Paul said in Rom. 1:16, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.”*

There have been churches who have gone into their communities and asked people what they thought about church and then changed their ways to conform to the desires of the people. There was one church who went into the surrounding neighborhoods and asked people, "Why do you not attend church?" The response they received was fivefold: "(1) Churches are always asking for money, (2) church services were boring and lifeless, (3) church services were predictable, (4) sermons were irrelevant to daily life in the real world, (5) and the preacher made people feel guilty or ignorant, so they leave church feeling worse than when they entered the doors." Based on the results of their surveys, this church redesigned their worship service. The result was an innovative approach to worship that involved "drama, contemporary music, and sermons designed to make people feel good about themselves. They also began to play down any solicitation or obligation on the part of the people attending to financially contribute. This church grew to about 21,000 members. When you give the people what they want, they will come. But the obligation of the Lord’s church is to preach the truth whether the modern world likes it or not. Paul told Timothy, *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”* (2 Tim. 4:2) There has always been conflict between the church of Christ and the modern world. If we listen to the modern world and give them what they want rather than what they need, we will become like them and cease to be the church of Christ.

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