



Welcome to a 'Whatever' World

By Rick Chromey

Bob Dylan's apocalyptic announcement nearly four decades ago seems incredibly insightful. "The times, they are a-changing. . . ." It was a much different world. Television was black and white (as were many schools and businesses) and boasted three channels (via antenna). Technology was a space program or newfangled home appliance. Computers occupied whole rooms. Meanwhile, the church was a respected neighborhood entity, home to revivals, Christmas pageants, and fellowship dinners.

How times have changed!

In a microwave world where life is swift and spontaneous, it's hard to stay still. Technology rules our lives. The computer chips that sent men to the moon now mark time on our wrists. A cell phone commercial suggests various new uses for the "old" home phone (such as a doggie toy or a hammer for pounding food). A new computer is obsolete the next day. And you better mind your technological ABCs because our culture is loaded with VCR, MP3, DVD, CD-ROM, CD-R and PDA. Biotechnology has forever changed our world, from pacemakers to cloning.

Dylan recorded his charge for change on vinyl. Later it was reproduced in eight-track and cassette, and then remastered for compact disc. Today, it's downloaded in MP3 from the Web and stored (with thousands of other songs) in players the size of card decks.

Television is now a colorful channel mix featuring weather, news,



Part 1:

The Times, They Have Been Changing

sports, music, shopping, home improvement, history, animals, science, arts, and entertainment (to name a few!). Do you remember when you first got cable? I do. My adolescent life and culture changed. MTV and The Weather Channel are now institutions, celebrating more than 20 years on the air. ESPN and HBO are household words.

Headline News reinvented itself in 2001: from a single talking head to a news montage of headlines, weather, and sport scores. Older viewers blasted the new look, but channel brass unabashedly confessed they were pursuing the younger crowd.

It seems like our world has changed overnight. And in fact, it has.

The WWW Difference

Only 10 years ago most people hadn't logged on to the Internet. Today, the "unconnected" are increasingly growing out of the loop in a World Wide Web world gone "e"—e-mail, e-banking, e-shopping, and e-learning. Some futurists predict in a decade everyone on earth will have an e-mail address and Web site (even if you don't use it).

That's amazing when you consider the World Wide Web wasn't invented until 1990, and it didn't catch public attention until 1994 after Netscape

browser technology was developed. Since 1996, Web sites have mushroomed from 100,000 to 4 million. By the time you read this article, “there will be more Web pages than people on the planet.”¹ Every 30 minutes, 2,800 people go online for the first time. This year it’s estimated nearly two-thirds of Americans will be connected.²

The Internet has changed everything. The “middle man” is history. Flights are booked online (good-bye travel agents). Need directions? Go to

Feeling Out of Touch?

Subscribe to *Wired* magazine (a secular magazine dedicated to the latest technological advances and cultural changes). Price is \$10 per year. Go to www.wired.com to subscribe.

MapQuest (no more Rand McNally). E-mail messages and attachments communicate faster (with apologies to our postal deliverers). Shopping online for books, music, and gifts eliminates long lines and parking problems. Looking for your past? It’s www.ancestors.com or www.classmates.com. Or just find a relic at eBay. Information is just a click away.

I stay in many hotels that offer in-room Internet access and televisions featuring direct connect to *USA Today* (no morning paper!). With help from Blackboard.com, I teach a distance-learning youth ministry course that hosts dozens of helpful links, discussion boards, and student tools.

The computer and the Internet have altered everything.

And yet I chuckle when John von Neumann, who invented the modern computer, confessed: “I don’t know how really useful this will be.”³

Considering the fact I’ve pounded out this manuscript on a laptop from my living room, a restaurant, the air-

port, and my car, I’m thankful to von Neumann. I rarely pine for those “old days” of typewriters (whatever happened to Wite•Out?).

Despite fears the Internet would disconnect people, it’s done the opposite. Chat rooms, discussion boards, and e-mail have forged and fostered relationships. When was the last time you wrote a personal letter and mailed it?

If you’re under 40, you might say it’s been years. My 13-year-old daughter recalls penning only “one or two” snail mails. That’s because the under-40s have grown up in this digital, high-tech, fast-paced culture while the over-40 crowd remembers another time. Leonard Sweet, in his book *Carpe Manana*, suggests two types of people exist today: *natives* and *immigrants*. *Natives* (born after 1962) have known nothing but this “new world” while *immigrants* (born before 1962) have lived in two cultures.⁴

From Reason to Experience

This cultural shift is much larger than generational, however.

It signals a change of global proportions. For the past 500 years, we lived in a “modern” context. Now, we are “postmodern.” That word unnerves many people. Some have called anything “postmodern” evil.⁵ One of my students claimed it was a hoax. Still others are just coming to terms with this monumental global cultural shift.

The modern world has operated for centuries, largely behind Gutenberg’s printing press (invented in the late 15th century), which helped catapult society from the Dark Ages into Enlightenment and Renaissance thinking and culture. Mass production of printed information changed everything, including the church. As the world turned on the hinges of modernity, the ages of science and reason emerged.

In the modern culture, everything

The Umpires

“There are three umpires hanging out after a baseball game. The **pre-modern umpire** says, ‘There are balls, and there are strikes, and I call ‘em what they are.’ The **modern umpire** says, ‘There are balls, and there are strikes, and I call ‘em as I see ‘em.’ The **postmodern umpire** says, ‘There are balls and there are strikes, and they ain’t nothing until I call ‘em.’”

—Adapted from J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31.

was reduced to laws and principles where truth (including God) was discovered through reason. It was a “who, what, when, where, and why” world. And the church reinvented itself around modern strategies: apologetic arguments, sermons (three points), Sunday school (hook, book, look, took), mass media (literature, radio, television) and, most recently, megachurches (with professional staff).

But the world has changed again. A new Gutenberg (the Internet) has rapidly shifted our culture and consciousness. And since there’s no way to truly describe this world other than “postmodern,” the word has stuck. Personally, I prefer to call it a “whatever” world. It’s the slang of our culture: “whatever.” Postmoderns operate with a “whatever” lifestyle. They follow creeds like: “Just Do It” or “No Rules, Just Right” (which is oxymoronic to modern thinking). “Whatever works for you” is postmodern pragmatism.

Consequently, they collect experiences like moderns gather arguments. God is to be discovered and He (or She or It) is what I’ve best experienced to date. Postmoderns

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bounce from doctrine and creed, seeking continually deeper experiences with God. To quote the postmodern hymn, authored by U2 in the mid-1980s, postmoderns “still haven’t found what [they’re] looking for.”

Modern churches and leaders find that thought outrageous. But even postmodern Christians know faith isn’t a destiny, but a dynamic. Christianity is not a period, but a question mark and exclamation point. It’s discovering that God is bigger than a theology, a doctrine, or creed.

A Salt-and-Pepper World

Postmoderns also are global and multicultural.

The American melting pot has been replaced by a salad bar. Our culture honors both diversity and tolerance. Black America has never been “blacker” (e.g. Black Entertainment Television, *Ebony* magazine, Kwanzaa) while white America remains just as white (white churches, white sitcoms, white CEOs).

Does this bother postmoderns? Not really. Postmoderns celebrate differences but condemn division. They don’t mind a salt-and-pepper lifestyle as long as we are seasoned in harmony. It doesn’t matter if the church remains, to quote Martin Luther King, “the most segregated place on Sunday morning,” as long as there’s unity in values.

Postmoderns welcome ethnic cultures. Just listen to the radio. It’s blues and pop, Latin and country, reggae and rap—sometimes all on the same station! Musical preference is fine, and specialty stations are acceptable. Just don’t “diss” my music or someone else’s. Similarly, ethnicity is celebrated and endorsed. Division and derision are not. You like opera? Hmmm. Whatever.

Rodney King’s “Can’t we all just get

Modern Values	Postmodern Values
Rational: cognitive & intellectual	Experiential: adventuresome & interactive
Scientific: investigation & answers	Spiritual: searching & questions
Unanimity: unicultural & homogenous	Pluralistic: multicultural & heterogenous
Exclusive: “only one way”	Relative: “many ways to the one way”
Denominational & divisive	Nondenominational & inclusive
Egocentric: build a better self	Altruistic: build a better world
Individualistic: consumer & self-focused	Communal: community & other-focused
Functional: stuff serves a purpose	Creative: beauty serves a higher purpose
Industrial: efficiency & accumulation	Environmental: safe & recycling
Local: “snail mail” & hometown living	Global: e-mail & travel
Compartmentalized and Separated	Holistic and Integrated
Relevant: “Seeker Sensitive”	Authentic: “Being Real”

—Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 32-37.

along?” means as much as Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream.” We are all different, but not divided. The Euro-American way was to “make people white.” For 500 years, the church converted people to both Christianity and white culture. But in a global, multicultural world, the church needs to add color, not bleach it. Honor color and culture. Welcome diversity and differences.

Our culture also has become participatory. Everybody plays a part now. We are the story. One of the reasons *Survivor* is such a hit is people identify with the characters (who are real individuals, not actors). Talk shows are postmodern paradises where closets are opened, feelings are shared, and relationships mend or melt. Major sporting events feature online polls and discussions. MTV airs videos with viewer’s comments trailing below. It’s not uncommon for audiences now to sing onstage with their music idols.

And then along comes the church.

The typical church service is an hour where a few people sing from stage followed by a 40-minute homily. “No wonder church is boring,” one postmodern groaned, “you just sit there and watch.”

And What About the Church?

Since 1980, our world has undergone a metamorphosis, from a modern caterpillar to a postmodern butterfly culture. No longer black and white, it’s a colorful world. Words have been replaced by images. It’s not arguments, but experiences. It’s not authority figures and representational government, but participatory democracy. Everyone is a Gutenberg today.

It’s a different world.

The question remains: Will the church change?

Can the church change?

Trust me, the “natives” are restless.

¹Leonard Sweet, *Carpe Manana* (Zondervan, 2001), 33.

²Sweet, 34.

³Sweet, 33.

⁴Sweet, 14.

⁵The problem is that many have confused “postmodern” with “post-Christian.” The former speaks to a cultural context while the latter to a religious one. Just as it’s possible to be a “modern” atheist, it’s also possible to be a “postmodern” Christian.

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**NEXT WEEK: The Church Must Change or Die
COMING APRIL 20: Ideas for Reaching Postmoderns**