

These Frames Don't Work
A Sermon in Conversation – Vision Dream #4
Matthew 13: 44-53
Jon Frost and Chris Clark

A couple of weeks ago I had to update my eyeglass prescription so I went in, had my exam, and ordered my new frames. After they arrived and I had worn them for several days, something did not seem right. Whether I was staring at a screen, or out on the road, things were not as clear as you would expect them to be with a new prescription. Each day it just felt like my eyes had to work way too hard. When I took them back and had them looked at, sure enough, they had made an error with my pupillary distance....like a pretty bad error which explained my difficulty to see.

As we get our heads around the 4th God sized dream of our vision - Equipping the Emerging Generation - we need to recognize that we are living in the midst of a profound cultural shift - a frame shift if you will. And trying to equip the emerging generation without acknowledging this shift is like trying to see through frames with a faulty prescription. To some extent it affects all 4 of the dreams, but the shift is most pronounced in emerging generations. Though they did not cause it, they most thoroughly embody it.

The shift can be put broadly as moving from a modern cultural frame, emerging in roughly the 18th century with the Enlightenment, to a postmodern cultural frame, emerging within the last several decades. There are a host of ways to describe this shift but perhaps the most concise way is to think of each frame's view of knowledge. In the modern frame, the thinking individual self was at the center of the world. Harnessing the power of the rational mind, humanity could arrive at knowledge that was certain, objective, and good. The modern frame favored absolute truths and generally had an optimistic view of the trajectory of the world. As you might guess, the postmodern frame challenges these assumptions.

In our culture today, paths to knowledge other than rationality are valued equally or more so like experience, emotion, and intuition. Objectivity is also rejected, instead acknowledging that everything is contextual, dependent upon and reflective of the communities in which we participate. Truth has become more relative and there tends to be more pessimism about the world.

Let me try to illustrate the shift in my own life using our passage for today. I remember hearing this passage growing up mainly used as a defensive text against any kind of question related to the integrity or authority of the Bible. "All Scripture is inspired" became a sort of gatekeeper phrase designed to keep out dangerous questions that might chip away at my hold on truth. Now, when I read this passage, I'm moved by the

way it describes the mystery and beauty of how this God-breathed text is handed down from one generation to another and takes root in the lives of a community - not just an individual - living out their faith together.

This shift is occurring whether we recognize it or not. Many argue that the difficulty the Church has right now in reaching the next generation is that we are seeing the world with completely different frames and we continue to wonder where all the young people have gone.

Younger generations often drift away from a faith community or generally have no interest in one because they are more apt to question and voice their doubt instead of continue with the status quo. Also, because of the way the internet has made the world smaller, now more than ever, people are exposed to previously an unimaginable diversity of thought and expression. Rather than maintain rigid lines in the sand, younger generations generally remain open and may even identify with streams of thought that would have never coincided previously.

Younger generations are keenly aware of the damage and pain the Church has caused over the centuries – both in individual experiences and the history of Western Christianity. Though it has gotten better, overall the Church has not always done a great job of acknowledging its complicity, and at times lead role, in the brokenness of the world. I've heard stories of people being hurt by churches claiming to be more open or welcoming than they really are in practice. What seemed like a welcoming message of unconditional love on the outside turned out to have all kinds of conditions.

None of this is to say, however, that everything about the old frame is bad and everything about the new frame is good. Honestly, I am quite comfortable with the old frame. It is what I know best. Really, it was within that context that most of us, like Timothy in this passage, received instruction in the faith and were equipped for good work in the world. Without question, so much good has come out of the modern, Enlightenment era Church.

I honestly don't even know how to put into the words the extent to which my life has been shaped by the Church. From an early age my imagination was captivated by the weekly rhythm of worship, particularly in the way the Church expresses its faith through song. Experiences on mission trips around the world have challenged me and expanded my understanding of who God is. My identity as a follower of Jesus touches on every aspect of my life.

The Church has offered me community through a shared identity around the life and teaching of Jesus. The pattern of life, death and resurrection that I find in Jesus has embedded itself into my life narrative so much that it's how I see much of the world and how I'm inspired to live in the world. It's gathering around the table to share the eucharist that has become a constant reminder of that pattern of life.

Passing on a real and vibrant faith is in the Church's DNA. Granted, it's easy to be daunted by statistics about the declining presence of young people in the church. But we need to see this as an exciting opportunity rather than just a problem to be solved. And we also need to keep in mind that the Church has gone through massive shifts before in its history. Could this be a modern Reformation? God is still God and God's Spirit will continue to lead the Church. So what might equipping the emerging generation look like?

To start, it looks like listening more and talking less. Often there is a diagnosis of the emerging generations before there is ever a real substantive understanding of their perspective on reality – and we need to take it seriously. After listening, it is the work of empowering. It's the work of calling out the good things that young people have to offer. It's about giving them a platform to live out their ideas, their skills, their passions to help the world and everyone in it flourish better than it is today.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. This is a complex and daunting task that will require some uncomfortable moments and a willingness to stretch and be stretched. It may mean that rather than expecting young people to come to us, we will need to come alongside young people where they already are and earn the right to be heard. Before we can supply the next generation with knowledge about God, we must first provide a safe place to ask questions about God. We also need to connect the Bible and its teachings to lives today. We need to help young people answer, "What does Jesus have to do with me in 2018?" We need to aid them in connecting and forming a relationship with God, so they may lean on God in times of struggle.

We need to allow for the possibility that, in the long run, young people may not come back to a church building – or at least in any recognizable or consistent way we expect today. Ministry with young people will happen primarily outside the walls of the church. And it's going to take some serious imagination because it will require a massive paradigm shift - a shift toward the bodily experience of the world rather than the purely intellectual and rational experience of the world that the Enlightenment gave to us.

The Church can fill a unique void in our world today by encouraging intergenerational interactions. Our culture is becoming more fragmented as people at different life stages are separated from one another. We have senior living communities, daycares, colleges, workplaces. Our society is lacking a place to come together to be in community with one another, young and old, side by side. The Church can be just such a place.

I will admit; there is much about the cultural shift we are living in that gives me great anxiety. It feels like uncharted territory because what equipping the emerging generation looks like has changed drastically even since I was a kid in youth group. At the same time, I have great hope. Because even as we may feel anxiety about this dream, this passage from 2 Timothy reminds us that equipping the next generation can be as simple as finding one person to pour our life into like Paul did with Timothy. And we have one of the greatest gifts that God's people have always had - our story - this

God-breathed text, able to instruct us, or make us wise, for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. And that is what we need - wisdom. Wisdom to navigate changing cultural shifts, wisdom to get out of our comfort zones to reach people outside of these walls. Wisdom to know what understandings or expectations of church we need to let go of. Wisdom to equip the emerging generation.

May it be so. Amen.

Resources:

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Eerdmans, 1996.

Seel, John. *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church*. Thomas Nelson, 2018.