I’m OK, You’re OK

For the past few years, I have taken an occasional online graduate theology class at Lipscomb University and so I receive the school’s publication.  For our discussion read the excerpt of the article below entitled “Letter from the Dean: Christian Education in a Secular Cultural Landscape.”  It is taken from 2020-2021 issue of Lipscomb Now:  Bible & Ministry, a publication of the school of theology.  Think about whether you agree with the premise of the article and, if so, how to effectively evangelize to people who share the world view discussed.  In other words, how would you teach and approach individuals with this view while maintaining the integrity of Scripture?

As you think about the article read also the following verses:

Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy[a] that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Luke 9:23 – “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

John 14:6 – “Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

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I’m just guessing that you probably didn’t read the 2018 article in Gentlemen’s Quarterly titled “21 Books You Don’t Have to Read Before You Die.”  Among them is the Bible.  The GC editors wrote: “Those who have read the Bible know there are some good parts, but overall it is certainly not the finest thing man has ever produced.”  They sum up the contents in one sentence: “It is repetitive, self-contradictory, foolish and even, at times, ill-intentioned.”  So much for the Bible.

These words tell us something about the new cultural landscape around us.

Most of us grew up in a very different landscape.  One where the Bible was both revered and read.  The restoration movement that produced modern Churches of Christ began with a focus on the freedom and duty of Christians to read and study the Bible for themselves, not depending on creeds or human traditions to tell them what it teaches.

David Lipscomb believed that through the reading, study and meditation of Scripture believers communed with God.  Through such practices God’ spirit forms believers into the image of Christ and equips them for God’s mission.  And James Harding, his colleague, could say, “The most important thing in the world is daily, diligent, prayerful study of the divine word.”

This has been our heritage in Churches of Christ.

Today we live in a very different place than those strong Bible readers of our past.  We live in a very secular culture.  Charles Taylor, Christian philosopher and author of A Secular Age, has distinguished three stages in the history of secularization of Western culture.  He calls our present culture “secular 3.” In secular 2 there was a divide between sacred spaces and secular spaces, but in secular 3 the loss of transcendence settles over everything.  We live now in what he calls the “immanent frame.”

Most people still say they believe in God, but God becomes an individually constructed concept.  People pick and choose the religious concepts that they think will most help them follow their own path to “personal authenticity.”  Ideas of God, marriage and morality all become ideas in the service of authenticity.  They are kept, altered or discarded as it may suit the individual.

Christian Smith, in his extensive study of youth and religion, concluded that the operative religion of American young people in this era is what he termed “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

Moralistic – God wants me to be a good person and not a jerk.

Therapeutic – God or religion should help me feel good.

Deism – God is a concept to decorate our lives with but not an agent who really does anything.

In this outlook, God does little more than ask us to be good and, in return, offers us good feelings.  In secular 3, the fundamental Christian claim that God is an acting force in the world becomes marginalized, for many even unbelievable.  Spirituality becomes a kind of psychological aid for one’s own journey toward fulfillment.