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Ministries & Theology

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Spring 2009

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마태복음 Matthew 18: 19-20

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (NRSV)

*Journal of Korean American
Ministries & Theology*

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Preaching Ministry in the Postmodern Era

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I. Introduction—Preaching Ministry under Siege

In his article that has an indicative title, “The Interrupted Sermon,” Richard Lischer relates an anecdote:

Several months ago, I found myself worshipping for the first time in a small church near the place where my family and I were vacationing. The preacher was giving a homily on the story of David and Bathsheba. She confessed that the story had set off a struggle within her over the punishment that had been meted out to Bathsheba for what the prophet Nathan identifies as David’s sin. She noted that the story is told only for its importance to David and his lineage, and proceeded to retell it from Bathsheba’s point of view. Given the king’s power over his subjects, she tentatively surmised, who is to say that what occurred between them was not closer to rape than adultery.

At this point, something unusual happened. A man in the congregation interrupted her and said, “You are imposing your assumptions on this text. You’ve got your own program. It doesn’t say ‘rape’ in the text. David was a great king of Israel.”

...The preacher defended her interpretation, the man accused her of feminism, muttered something about “white male bashing,” and then walked out of the church.¹

The sermon interrupted? What is wrong?

In his book, *The Practice of Preaching*, Paul S. Wilson asserts a traditional understanding of preaching: “Preaching is not ordinary speech, but the sound of God speaking.”² According to him, God uses the preacher’s voice to speak God’s word in the lives of people today, through the correct reading and interpretation of Scripture.³ Why was the sermon in Lischer’s story “the sound of God’s speaking” interrupted? Of course, we can say that it was interrupted because of

the differences of perspective between the preacher and the church member, and that it is a simple incident which can take place at any church. The particular issue in controversy does not matter because the incident might have occurred over a variety of issues—for instance, social issues such as abortion, homosexuality, divorce; theological issues such as liberation theology and feminist theology; and even over political issues. As Lischer mentions, however, the incident represents “a parable of the church’s discourse today” and is indicative of “the new situation in preaching.”

In fact, the new situation in preaching is a preaching ministry besieged by many strange factors. First of all, a new way of viewing the world has emerged. The “modern” way of thinking, that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has become obsolete. Many scholars anticipate that the twenty-first century will be characterized as the “postmodern age.”⁴ This emerging postmodern worldview becomes the new challenge for the so-called evangelical church and its preaching ministry.

Caleb Rosado asserts that a great chasm exists between the church and contemporary society.⁵ This chasm reflects the church’s inability to communicate effectively the gospel message to society. In order to communicate God’s word effectively today, the church must be knowledgeable both of theological and sociological principles. This understanding will assist the church in reinterpreting the gospel in its cultural context and in reconsidering the methods for communicating it. Here we raise some serious questions: Will “a twenty minute monologue”⁶ have the same power and influence in the next millennium? If not, how can we tell God’s word, the Christian story, in a postmodern, pluralistic world?⁷ What kind of factors and traditions should we change and preserve? While changing the outer garments of faith, of course, we have to preserve “the substance of faith” and “true tradition in his changing world in the context of the original text.”⁸

In this article, I contend that to reach those members of contemporary society and congregations who might be characterized as “postmodern” in their thinking and consciousness, the church must reexamine and reevaluate its approach to preaching in the twenty-first century.

II. The Implications of Post-modernity for Preaching Ministry⁹

A. Paradigm Shift and Changes

We are living in a period when old and established ways of understanding our world are giving way to radically new perspectives. John B. Cobb asserts that “recognition that western culture is in deep transition” is widespread and that “the environmental cries have forced recognition that past policies no longer work, so that a practical change is required.”¹⁰ Like Cobb, most observers of contemporary history concede that western civilization is undergoing a fundamental shift in its worldview. The shift has been spurred by the discoveries and theoretical developments that have occurred in the natural sciences over the past 150 years.¹¹ Even though this is ongoing shift and the detailed character of the emerging worldview is still somewhat vague, its general features do appear fairly clear. The new perspective could be called many things, but here it will be identified as “postmodern.” The foundations of the modern world are collapsing and we are entering a postmodern world.¹² As David S. Dockery mentions, in this respect the twenty-first century will be characterized as the “postmodern age.”¹³

Even though the term “postmodern” has no settled definition, it roughly refers to the contemporary context in which radical pluralism has created a climate of relativism and “a growing consciousness of the radical way” in which language and culture shape reality. It is not a polemical catch phrase, but “a heuristic term.”¹⁴ “Postmodern” serves as a code for an epoch that has only just begun in this century, a period whose intrinsic value is acknowledged, but has not quite been comprehended. Hans Küng understands modernity and post-modernity as “a paradigm.” He says, “modernity... is not a ‘finished program’ nor is it...an ‘unfinished project,’ rather, modernity is in transition, it is a paradigm that has grown old that must be built up anew.”¹⁵ Subsequently, the word “postmodern” can be used to designate a paradigm shift from the modern world view.

Because in the transition from the modern, Enlightenment paradigm to the post-modern paradigm, a change, in fact, takes place in the “entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on, shared by the members of a given community”, a change, therefore, in the way men and women generally perceive themselves, society, the world, and God.¹⁶

B. Selected Contours of the Postmodern Worldview

The shift to a postmodern worldview means that theological concerns must be restated in terms which are relevant to the changing contexts. The understanding of the preaching task must

be stated not only in terms relevant to the postmodern context, but also in such a way that the church may “preach to its age without preaching its age,” as P. T. Forsyth has said.¹⁷ The new context is characterized by relativistic and pluralistic attitudes, an increasing plausibility of belief in God, a heightened emphasis on creativity and the role of biblical revelation and authority.

1. A Relativistic and Pluralistic Attitude¹⁸

Some defining characteristics of the postmodern era are its epistemological relativism and its pluralism. Truth is relative. The defining feature of the postmodern is that relativism is accepted as the nature of the human condition and that there is no center; therefore, nothing has been lost or given up.¹⁹ Pluralism from this perspective represents alternative possibilities of experience and expression.

There is no place for universal reason in a postmodern world where all paradigms, or worldviews are equal because each has its own logic.²⁰ Reason is also viewed as inconsistent with postmodern confidence in emotion, feeling, intuition, autonomy, creativity, imagination, and contemplation. In the postmodern context there is no longer an absolute authority or a meta-narrative that can explain and govern action. Jean-Francois Lyotard had defined the postmodern era as a mood or state of mind about how to live in the present condition of fragmentation and pluralism.²¹ He bases this conclusion on the loss of meta-narrative and a subsequent shift from universalism to localism as a focal point. According to him, localized narrative provides a better guiding scheme than a grand universal narrative.

Here we raise a question that we must struggle to answer in the postmodern world: “Is the presence of the Spirit to be found exclusively in Christ, as Christians claim?”²² This question has profound implications for preaching. According to Hans Küng, “the biblical message, the crucial criterion of all talk about God, is concentrated on Jesus Christ, in whom for believers God himself has spoken and acted.”²³ Richard Lischer understands the significance of the preaching task in the light of the resurrection of Christ.²⁴ In a similar vein, Craig Loscalzo places great importance upon the incarnation in understanding the work of the preacher and the preaching task.²⁵ Preaching flows from the life of Jesus, the Christ, and receives power from its nature as an announcement of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. In this respect, therefore, if one

were to discuss possible “stumbling blocks” for acceptance of the gospel in postmodern culture, one would have to cite claims about the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus, the Christ.²⁶

2. The Viability of Belief in God

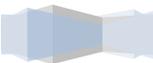
Modern philosophy tended to make belief in God less plausible than it had been in the pre-modern era. Hindering belief in God in the modern era is the assertion that belief in God thwarted humanity’s quest to be free from oppression. A belief that became prevalent in the modern era was materialistic determinism. Such determinism leaves no room for belief in God. Another reason for rejecting belief in God is the assertion that all knowledge must come through the senses. If one cannot see God, how can one prove indubitably that God exists? If God’s existence cannot rationally be proved in a manner adequate to satisfy a rigid foundationalist epistemology, one cannot argue for God’s existence.²⁷

Traditional beliefs about God that made belief difficult in the modern era are being restated by theologians within each of the major strands of postmodernism—deconstructionism, constructionism, restorationism, and liberationism.²⁸ They react against modern concepts of God that are often seen to be patriarchal and nationalistic by describing God “in the form of a *theos* who takes the side of the disinherited against the powerful and who can be known only in highly particularistic ways.”²⁹

3. Creativity

A theological aspect of postmodern thought is its emphasis upon creativity. Such an emphasis has been posited by revisionary postmodernists as a means of resolving problematic areas within the modern understanding of God. For instance, some of these problematic areas include the problem of evil, the transmission of the biblical text, the rise of evolutionary perspectives, and “mind-body” problems.

Creativity becomes important in several different ways. Evil exists because created beings have within them the power to resist God’s will and God’s power. Another sign of creativity is seen in the biblical texts themselves. The Bible shows signs of human creativity. Scientific evidence itself has shown that the universe has been billions of years in the making. If



the element out of which the world was made had no inherent creative power, one would not expect the earth to be so long in the making.

Griffin sees a difference between an ethic of obedience and an ethic of creativity. In modern times, emphasis was placed upon subservient obedience to an omnipotent being. In postmodern times, the emphasis will be upon an ethic of creativity. Every being has within it some *anima* or possibility of creativity.³⁰ In the modern era, generally one meta-narrative was recognized as the focus of creativity. However, a postmodern vision will recognize many differing strands that foster creativity.

4. The Bible

A critical issue for preaching which will be affected by a shift to post-modernity is authority. What gives a preacher authority to be heard and to have his or her message accepted? Evangelical Christians have traditionally found their locus of authority in the Bible. While Rudolf Bultmann sought to demythologize the Scripture, postmodernists are seeking to “remythologize Scripture.” By remythologizing, they mean that the Bible needs to have its “disturbingly mythological voice” restored “so that its diagnostic of the human condition and its prescription for individual and communal renewal can be recovered again.”³¹

A postmodern view of the proper use of the Bible will be changed according to this stream of thought. The response of Restorationists is to view the Bible as the infallible, inerrant revelation of God. In the postmodern context, there appears to be a willingness to reexamine ancient texts in a new way. The postmodern use of the Bible does not ignore the benefits that have come through higher textual criticism. It does, however, move beyond such issues to find a voice in the Bible able to speak to many of the ills of contemporary society.

Meanwhile, deconstructionist thought with its emphasis upon themes such as the loss of meta-narrative and loss of language as signification makes appeals to biblical authority problematic. In a similar vein, epistemological relativism makes the assertion that “the Bible says so,” untenable as well. A key concept for the postmodern use of the Bible is to allow the Bible to become a set of lenses through which one views life and reality. The challenge of preaching in the postmodern context will be to present the ancient texts in such a way as to allow them to become the lenses through which a congregation views reality.

III. Preaching Ministry in the Postmodern World

How can we more adequately picture the preaching task in the postmodern era? Any attempt to preach Christ in the postmodern era will need to strike a delicate balance between tailoring the message to be relevant to its hearers and attempting to stand out from—and challenge—the culture. These questions have been asked about homiletical approaches that purport to be postmodern, “Is this too much enculturation and too little preaching? Has the tradition and the need for the tradition been overwhelmed by a certain way of trying to engage the world on its own terms?”³²

In this chapter, I will suggest some categories for preaching ministry in the postmodern era, including language, preaching with imagination, creativity, truth, and authority. These categories are offered not only for methodological consideration, but also as theological emphases as well.

A. Language and Modes of Discourse

In the premodern world, mythic speech was customary. Pre-moderns believed that events and realities in myth corresponded to reality. Pre-moderns made little distinction in kinds of discourse. Meanwhile, the modern world distinguished between scientific, propositional language and mythic language. The former was preferable because it could be verified empirically. Propositional language could describe reality with objective precision. The preacher simply needed to present and explain an idea to the congregation. The preacher could also tell a story to illustrate the proposition or to add interest to the sermon.

Meanwhile, the postmodern world recognizes that human understanding and expression are multivalent. Propositional language is salutary for certain tasks. But people in the postmodern era also recognize that story and metaphor are fundamental to the full fabric of human understanding.³³ In his book, *New Era in Religious Communication*, Pierre Babin described the “catechetical way” and the “symbolic way” of communication. He says, “Do you want to express the gospel today? Use symbolic language. That was Jesus’ language, and it is the dominant language of the media today. It adds modulation to abstract words. It is the best way of putting thought on show.”³⁴

While Babin states clearly that the symbolic way is preferred, he does not abandon the catechetical way. Catechetical language can serve “to preserve the unity of the church and to give Christians the security of a number of reference points.”³⁵ According to Babin, symbolic language is a language of temptation not because of any ethical compromise, but because it is inductive, luring the listener into participation, creating a situation in which one discovers a need before supplying the answer to that need. The opposite of symbolic language is conceptual language, a language which “provides an abstract, limited, and fixed mental representation of reality.”³⁶ The symbolic way leads to an awareness of the need of—or desire for—faith while, the catechetical way provides detail and specific content.

Postmodern preachers pay attention to “the powerful role of imagination” and “root metaphors” in shaping human reality. However, they are inheritors of both scientific and mythic languages. Thus, a preacher is always “on the bubble” to judge which kind of discourse is most appropriate for a given sermon.

B. Imagination in Preaching

Imagination is “the capacity for forming images in the mind and the human means of interpreting the world.” Imagination helps for us to join “in knowing interplay, in participation with others and the world.” Therefore, imagination is “central to human knowing.”³⁷ Although the use of imagination is important, imagination is often confused with fancy. Warren Wiersbe makes a helpful distinction, “Fancy helps me escape reality, while imagination helps me penetrate reality and understand it better.”

The relativity and loss of totalizing discourse and meta-narrative inherent in postmodernism should lead preachers to use imagination in the postmodern context. Some of the defining characteristics of the contemporary world, and one would presume of the postmodern world as well, are fragmentation, discontinuity, eclecticism, and commercialism.³⁸ In many of the music videos popular with contemporary adolescents, the images to which to viewer is subjected change every two second and may often be unrelated to what has gone before. Juxtaposition of unlike qualities may prove to be a fruitful methodology for preaching the gospel in the postmodern era.

It would seem that the most effective preaching, particularly in the postmodern context, would be that which engages the imagination of the listener. Thomas Troeger says that sermons must be grounded in our experience.³⁹ Frederick Buechner notes, “the sermons we preach to ourselves around the preacher’s sermons are the sermons we hear most powerfully.”⁴⁰ The observations of Buechner and Troeger, coupled with the analogy used by Wilson of the juxtaposition of “two ideas that might not otherwise be connected and developing the creative energy they generate,” provide a rich metaphor for preaching in the contemporary context. The well-chosen story or fertile image can allow sermons “to pierce through the numbness of the human mind and heart and to trigger both the individual and collective storehouses of images and metaphors which link us to our spiritual roots.”⁴¹

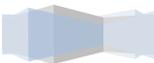
C. Creativity in Postmodern Preaching

David Buttrick argues that a preacher is seeking to create consciousness in the act of preaching.⁴² By creating such consciousness, the preacher enables the congregation to experience the gospel in their present reality. The call for creativity should not be understood merely as a call for preachers to use greater ingenuity in their sermon preparation, but also as a call for sermons to themselves create something in the consciousness and the experience of listeners.

Creativity comes from the life of the Creator being lived through God’s creations. Creativity is very closely linked with imagination, as the preacher must learn to create images which will connect the life of the listener with the world of biblical revelation. There are several ways one may learn to cultivate creativity in one’s preaching ministry.⁴³ Practically, we reconsider using various creative forms in preaching ministry in the postmodern era. Various forms of the creative arts can be utilized to communicate the gospel: reading and storytelling, short sketches, one-act plays, and full-length plays with secular themes but an underlying Christian message.⁴⁴

D. Authority

A critical issue for preachers in the postmodern era is the issue of authority. The congregation must recognize the authority of the sermon, or they will not be likely to accept its



claims and visions. In a climate of relativism, preachers need to answer questions such as, “why should my message be accepted?” and “What right do I have to be heard?”

The pre-modern era assumed the authority of the Bible, ecclesial tradition and clergy. The preacher might debate the interpreted word; the community would accept the validity of text, doctrine or teaching. Meanwhile, in the modern era, the empirical method provided the model for authority; the community could trust those things that it could validate through its senses. Much of the preaching of the modern era assumed that the listener accepted both the speaker’s right to speak and the authority of the Bible. Fred Craddock characterizes the deductive approach to preaching, which tended to be dominant in the modern era, as an unnatural mode of communication because it operates under the assumption that the listener already accepts both the authority of the speaker and the truth the speaker is seeking to communicate.⁴⁵ However, the pluralistic and relativistic postmodern worldview lacks universally recognized standards of truth. A preacher cannot simply invoke an exterior source (such as custom or science) as sufficient basis for the congregation’s assent.

The concept of authority will need to be redefined in the postmodern context. The preacher must present a rationale for why the congregation should be shaped by the gospel message. According to Richard Allen, two of the most important resources available to the postmodern minister for developing authority are “tradition and experience.”⁴⁶ A pastor can point out that the gospel and its texts and values have helped people in many different times and situations. The preacher can also point to ways in which the gospel and its claims prove true in the experience of the community. An authoritarian pulpit style will not be well received. The challenge of the postmodern preacher is to create a world in the consciousness of the listener, in which the gospel can be delivered to them.

E. Truth

The preacher is called to tell the truth, the word of God. Here, however, we confront the question “What is truth?” How do our listeners acknowledge the truth that the preacher proclaims? For pre-modern and modern preachers, this issue was easier than for preachers in the postmodern world of relativism and pluralism.⁴⁷ For the pre-modern preacher, truth was largely accepted as “the correspondence between appearance and reality.” For them, tradition was

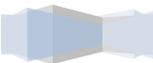
always the source of truth. Therefore, pre-modern preachers would tell the truth “by elucidating the tradition and by helping the community discern how the realities of the tradition impinged on the practices of the community.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, for modern preachers, truth has two prevalent sources: empirical observation and logical deduction. Truth is “the correspondence between statement and empirical observation of reality” or “logical consistency with necessary first principles.” Preachers begin with uncontested Christian foundational principles and demonstrate the degree to which other Christian statements cohere with those principles.⁴⁹

The very notion of truth itself is not easy to grasp in a pluralistic and relativistic postmodern setting, because many deconstructionists explicitly deny universal truth. For them, truth is “nothing more than a function of power” and “the prejudices of the most powerful people in a culture raised to the highest possible level in consciousness.”⁵⁰ Here the preacher can use the method of mutual critical correlation to determine correspondence between his or her claims and an enlarged understanding of experience. Preachers must preach beyond their own experience and probe for the truth by means of the mutual critical correlation of Christian vision and experience.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the postmodern version of truth defines three rubrics for preaching that help a congregation to be open to a sermon: honesty, humility, and openness. The homiletic of mutual critical correlation is marked by honest discussion of the issues, humility in the face of our finite perceptions, and critical openness to other notions of truth.⁵²

IV. How Shall We Preach to the Postmodern Mind?

We live in what scholars call the era of postmodernism. How do we tell God’s word and pay attention to preaching ministry to reach out to the changing mind of our age? All effective preaching is contextual. It is an important task for a preacher to understand the context and form in which he or she preaches. David Buttrick gives us wise advice about the task of homiletics in the changing age:

If we are moving into an age defined by analogies of consciousness rather than by objective rationality, then we must attend to how language forms in consciousness. Such a task will lead us into a renewed alliance with rhetoric. ... Homiletics will describe the “hows” of preaching in a new way. ... The postmodern world will turn toward a renewed interest in the interpersonal. ... The task that faces pulpits now is the forming of theological meaning in a twenty-first-century consciousness. ... Through the language of preaching, narration, and naming, we are called to build a theological world in which people may live and move and indeed have



their being. ... So preaching will have to disengage from Enlightenment Christianity and quite deliberately seed itself in a forming new world beyond modernity, a world that is being shaped largely in countercultural communities, among the socially disenfranchised and in the liberation movements of the “other world.”⁵³

People who attend each worship service bring their own unique needs, desires, fears, pains, backgrounds, and cultural worldviews. Given this diversity and concerns that characterize postmodern culture, how do we preach in its context today? What type of preaching is effective for the task?

A. The Evocation of Experience

Contemporary culture is producing people who prefer to learn experientially. Experience is “the new currency of our culture.” In the past, we first obtained knowledge about a subject or issue and then later validated that knowledge. In the modern church, most of our preaching focused on the logical presentation of facts to move people toward a decision, which worked great for a modern mindset. However, now, we are living in a time of revolutionary change. There are the grand shifts from knowledge to experience and from broadcast to interactive. In the postmodern era, people are most influenced by experience. Dan Kimball advises preacher as follows,

[O]ur job is to take into consideration how we present truth to the people we hope to see transformed. If the goal of our preaching is to bring about behavioral change as people learn to become disciples of Jesus, and if we focus only on preaching with words to the exclusion of experiential teaching, we will not have the impact we are hoping for in our emerging church. We need to give people truthful experiences along with truthful teaching.⁵⁴

The emerging paradigm for preaching in the postmodern epoch, the New Homiletics, has pursued and focused on the creation of experience as opposed to a propositional privileging of content. Although there are a variety of forms in the stream, most of them have emphasized human experience. The New Homiletics represents “a turn away from cognitive-propositional preaching to experiential preaching.” According to Fred B. Craddock, preaching focuses on engaging the hearer in the pursuit of an issue or an idea so that he or she will think his or her own thoughts and experience his or her own feelings in the presence of Christ and in the light of

the gospel. Like Craddock, theorists of what is coming to be known as the New Homiletics have been interested in what the sermon may do and even undo in the experience of the receiving audience, rather than pointedly conveying content.⁵⁵

In postmodern culture, there is no interest in a “secondhand” God, a God that someone else—church tradition, church professionals, and church bureaucracies—defines for listeners. For them, the experience is the message. They literally feel their way through life. It is most important to give them a new experience they have not had before and to provide experiences of worship and activity in the church.

B. Participatory/ Interactive Preaching

Postmodern culture is characterized as “a choice culture” or “a participatory culture.”⁵⁶ It shifts from representative to participatory. A representative culture is based on definite beliefs that people want and need to be controlled and have decisions made for them, while a participatory culture is based on just the opposite beliefs. Postmoderns want to make their own decisions from among various choices. Leonard Sweet notes the following:

Postmoderns don't give their undivided attention to much of anything without its being interactive. It is no longer enough to possess things or to enjoy positive events. One now has to be involved in bringing those events to pass or brokering those things into the home. People want to participate in the production of content, whatever it is.⁵⁷

One of the major issues in current homiletics is the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. Traditionally, the preacher has remained in a privileged position as the source of the message or information, while the congregation has remained only a passive recipient—“the destination of the sermon.” To be more effective in the postmodern era, however, preachers should rethink their relationship with the listener. Recognizing this gap between the preacher and the listener, Lucy Rose maintains that the relationship between the preacher and the listener should be that of “equal partners on a journey.”⁵⁸ For the preacher, the listeners are God's people taking a trip into the word of God together with the preacher. Therefore, preaching should involve listeners' participation; they should recognize the sermon as their own. The goal of a sermon is to open a gate to listener participation and help the listener recognize it as relevant to his or her situation.

C. Image-Driven/ Story-Centered Preaching

Postmodern culture is image-driven; in contrast, the modern world was text-based. Theologians in the modern era tried to create an intellectual faith, placing reason and order at the heart of religion. Mystery and metaphor were eliminated as too uncertain, too mystical, and too illogical. After forfeiting the role of storyteller, “the church now enters a world where story and metaphor are at the heart of spirituality.” Postmodern culture offers the contemporary church the lesson that “images generate emotions, and people will respond to their feelings.”⁵⁹ In this respect, contemporary homileticians are more concerned with the importance of language in the art of preaching, because it is one of the most important factors determining whether a sermon is heard. Accordingly, a preacher should develop an appropriate sermonic language to form congregational consciousness. In particular, images and metaphors provide an appropriate language pattern in sermons for the consciousness of the hearers. Postmodern preachers should consider the sermonic languages, rather than being discursive, cognitive, or logical, must instead show, paint pictures of, and evoke experience. Here metaphor, image, and story are very significant tools for postmodern preaching.

For Jesus, a story is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience. Story provides shared space, ground held in common in its operation. For the sender of the message, telling the gospel as story means entering into it. To make this point, Robert Waznak, in his book, *Sunday after Sunday*, tells Martin Buber’s well known Hasidic tale about how a lame grandfather became so much part of the story he was telling that he experienced the liberative and healing message of the story.

My grandfather was lame. Once he was asked to tell a story about his teacher and he told how the Holy Baal Shem Tov used to jump and dance when he was praying. My grandfather stood up while he was telling the story and the story carried him away so much that he had to jump and dance to show the master had done it. For the moment, he was healed. This is how stories ought to be told.⁶⁰

The miracle of good storytelling is that tellers and listeners are healed because they recognize the story as their own. Thus, preaching is basically telling God’s story and our story. Story is both a primary tool to reveal our identity and the stuff that forms Christian preaching.

The challenge of preaching in this new century is to present the Christian gospel in imaginative ways that empower listeners to find therein structures to understand morsels of their own life experiences.

V. Conclusion

We, the preachers, find ourselves in a new cultural context, replacing the current one that is collapsing around us. The shift from the modern era to the postmodern era poses a serious challenge to the church's mission to the next generation. To reach people in the new emerging context, we have to set ourselves to the task of deciphering the implications of postmodernism for the gospel.⁶¹ An understanding of the impact of the context will help preachers recognize how to address contemporary audiences.

Postmodern culture is not the first cultural crisis for preachers. The church has been continually challenged since the first century. In Chinese, the characters for the word 'crisis' (위기; 危機) have two meanings—danger and opportunity. In Hebrew, the word for crisis is *mash-ber*, a word used for birth stool, a seat upon which a woman in ancient times sat as she gave birth. This illustrated the two possibilities inherent in childbirth—new life or loss of child and mother. Therefore, the challenge for the preacher in the postmodern era is to give listeners a “witness” with clear and effective voices.

The postmodern era presents preachers with both challenge and opportunity: modernist assumptions under which preachers have been operating for decades are no longer applicable yet there is a greater openness to faith. There is little doubt that the world is becoming more pluralistic. How do we preach in this pluralistic age and preserve or renovate our homiletical heritage? For preachers in the postmodern era, one of the biggest problems is that they are standing in epistemological relativism and have to continue their preaching ministry in that mud of confusion.

Christians should contribute to a pluralist world “being who they are.” This contribution should be based on the realization that the Kingdom of Heaven is the only true home for the Christian, “the place that defines our most essential identity.” Failure to contribute to a genuine pluralism will result in being “lost in the wilderness of decayed traditions and vulnerable to the domination of modernity's suicidal infatuation with power.”⁶²

In some respect, those who proclaim the Christian message may be heartened by the possibility that the world context is becoming more favorable to Christian proclamation. We should be reminded, however, that the gospel has an element of offense in any epoch of history. The extent to which Christianity thrives, or just survives, will be determined by the adequacy of its response to changing cultural and intellectual conditions. As preachers learn to proclaim new images and assist their congregations in becoming communities that live out the gospel story made known in Christ, there will be fruitful opportunities for the proclamation of the gospel. Calvin Miller notes, “The church needs to know what the world wants to hear and yet also find a way to give what it needs to hear in a sermon.”⁶³ God still speaks through human mouthpieces in the changing era. It is one of the best things we know.

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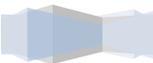
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Abstract

Title: Preaching Ministry in the Postmodern Era

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Preaching ministry is facing a crisis, as postmodernism began to permeate minds of people today with its radical pluralism. However, the dominance of postmodernism can be an opportunity for preaching. Through preaching Christians can contribute to this pluralistic world by truly being “who they are” and giving the conviction in the world of confusion. In order to speak to contemporary audiences, however, preachers should understand the congregations who are living in the postmodern society and how to communicate with them. To preach the gospel preachers need to use story and metaphor, instead of propositional language, and to preach with imagination, creativity, truth, and authority. By evoking experiences of preachers or real people, speaking in participatory/interactive language in preaching, and using images or stories, preachers can communicate the Christian truth in this postmodern context.

Key Words: Preaching, Postmodern, Contemporary audiences, Communication, The Gospel

¹ Richard Lischer, “The Interrupted Sermon,” *Interpretation*, vol. 50, no. 2 (April 1996): 169.

² Paul S. Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁴ David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Victor Books Publications, 1995), 13.

⁵ Caleb Rosado, “The Nature of Society and the Challenge to the Mission of the Church,” *International Review of Mission*, vol. 77 (1988): 22-23.

⁶ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, “The Rise and Fall—and Rise?—of the American Pulpit,” *As I See It Today*, Unpublished Paper, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (Fall 1995).

⁷ Frederic B. Burnham, ed., *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World*, edited by Frederic B. Burnham (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), xi.

⁸ Hans Küng, “The Reemergence of the Sacred: Transmitting Religious Traditions in a Post-Modern World,” *Conservative Judaism*, vol. XL, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 9.

⁹ Here I omit defining postmodernity and explaining it in detail. In this section, for homiletical understanding in the postmodern era, I handle rather the general concept of postmodernity and its understanding in the sociocultural respect than in postmodern theology.

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¹¹ James B. Miller, “The Emerging Postmodern World,” *Postmodern Theology*, 1.

¹² Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 2.

¹³ David S. Dockery, “The Challenge of Postmodernism,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, 13.

¹⁴ Hans Küng, “The Reemergence of the Sacred,” 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶ *op.cit.*, 11.

¹⁷ P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 9.

¹⁸ Of course, this description is accurate only for deconstructive postmodernism, not for constructive postmodern thought.

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- ²² Lesslie Newbigin provides a very helpful discussion of the difference between inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism. Pluralism sees saving truth in all religions. Inclusivism is willing to grant salvation to adherents of other religions but view that salvation as basically coming through Christ. Exclusivism sees saving truth uniquely and exclusively as coming through Christ. See Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).
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- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 153
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- ⁴² David Buttrick, *Homiletics: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 116.
- ⁴³ In his recent book, *Narrative and Imagination*, Eslinger suggests a helpful way to cultivate it. See chapters 2, 4-5 of the book.
- ⁴⁴ For instance, Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Illinois, utilizes drama in its weekend “seekers services,” a service devoted solely to engaging seekers, not believers. See George G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 152, 166.
- ⁴⁵ Fred Craddock, *As One without Authority* 3rd edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 54.
- ⁴⁶ Ronald J. Allen, “As the Worldviews Turn,” 98.
- ⁴⁷ Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 59.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
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- ⁵⁸ Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJKP, 1997), 90-91.
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