
Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture

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‘When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?’ (Ps. 11:3).

We live in a pluralist society where the very concept of objective, absolute truth is perceived not just as antiquated but absurd. Epistemological and ethical fragmentation have led to moral relativism? The search for an apologetic strategy in post-modern society is a formidable challenge for the Christian church. Can we find a biblically informed and effective contemporary evangelical approach? Is the apologetic task feasible in a culture that denies the existence of objective, universal truth? Yet it is right for us to desire to communicate our faith. The challenge is how to do this in the context of today. *‘...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.’* (1 Pet. 3:15).

Under the auspices of modernity various ideologies flourished, but modernity failed to create the utopia to which it aspired and these conflicting ideologies came to be seen as ‘totalising oppressive meta-narratives’ (to use the jargon). In postmodernity Christianity too has come to be viewed in this way, a discredited meta-narrative. In facing the apologetic task, however, let us remember that *‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’* (Heb. 13:8).

There has been a significant shift in thinking which has relevance to those engaged in preaching. In the modernist mindset if something could be proved as true, or at least reasonable, the logical conclusion was that it ought to be accepted. Whereas the modernist who accepted the veracity of the Christian message was being hypocritical in not accepting its personal implications, the postmodernist is not constrained in this way. He is free to acknowledge its truth but not its absolute application because he lives in a relativistic world.

Preaching is a linear mode of discourse, which is generally coherent, sequential and essentially logical. The expository sermon, therefore, uses arguments, hypotheses, reasons and refutations as traditional instruments of rational discourse. As such it cultivates inferential thinking. In the context of postmodernism one might ask what place has a style of communication, which has a propositional content that appeals for understanding as a prerequisite to faith? It not only assumes and requires in the hearer an aptitude to organise information systematically and methodically but inferentially.

Although proclamation is, by nature, essentially spiritual it is also an intelligent activity that assumes modernist critical apparatus. In any sermon there is a particular line of thought where judgements and application are made in a coherent and orderly arrangement of argument. Preaching, therefore, assumes a competence in its hearers where the objective use of the mind is taken as a self-evident presupposition. It is not that it is essentially intellectual but that it is inherently rational. In other words it

assumes that reason is employed to enlighten. People may be moved emotionally by preaching but they are required firstly to understand its content!

Preaching is, after all, expositing a text that has syntactical structure and content that can be explicated. There is, therefore, not just a faith in the truth of the text but a concomitant and coterminous faith in reason itself. It engages the intellect and passions as well as the soul and will. It assumes that people are rational and analytical creatures. It is essentially a serious undertaking whose purpose is to convey biblical information and make claims in propositional form, all to the ultimate glory of God.

A sermon, of course, does not, necessarily, guarantee true content, for we are flawed, frail and feeble vessels made of clay. However, it does, at least, construct a context in which the question: 'is this true or false?' is relevant and meaningful. Whether it is sophisticated or simple it appeals to cognitive powers based on understanding and reason. It has a bias towards the ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially and because it is based on reason and order it has an inherent aversion for contradiction.

Preaching, we know, is not merely about knowing facts, even biblical facts! It involves an understanding of the implications, historical background and logical and theological connections. But in the postmodern world reality has been dismembered, meanings have been wrenched out of logical contexts and life has become idiosyncratic. The postmodern mindset has a predisposed antipathy to preaching because it is influenced by the philosophy of the age. Logic, reason, sequential thought and rules of contradiction are abandoned. In aesthetics this is known as Dadaism. This is a movement that flourished primarily in Switzerland, Germany and France from 1916 to 1920. In this cult aesthetic philosophy principles and practice in the arts, especially painting, were based on intentional irrationality, cynicism, anarchy and negation of the laws of beauty and social organisation. Dadaism has wider geographical, chronological and philosophical resonance as evidenced in today's postmodern psyche.

Thus it does not seem to matter that some 'truths' in the postmodern world actually contradict each other. How can this be explained? Contradiction requires mutually exclusive assertions that cannot possibly both, in the same context be true. It is context, therefore, that defines contradiction. If somebody says he prefers grapes to peaches and in the same breath says that he prefers peaches to grapes there is not, necessarily, a contradiction if one statement is made in the context of choosing curtains and the other expresses his eating preference. But if these statements are made in a singular context, say, in relation to decor alone, they are contradictory. Without a continuous and coherent context there is no such thing as contradiction.

Therefore when preaching the gospel is taken out of the context of linear history and presented in a world of discontinuity and fragmentation it is 'a truth' that does not contradict 'other truths'. The *Bible*, for example, presents us with a certain degree of Palestinian history. It has one continuous and coherent perspective. In today's world it is just one version of truth where contradictory perspectives have equal validity because culture is seen as the defining context.

To what extent, therefore, if any, should we modify either our message or methodology to adapt to a world that is pluralistic? How can we shape an apologetic

strategy that is relevant in the context of postmodernity and uncompromising in its eternal message? What are the challenges that such strategies present in the context of the local church?

Pluralism, individualism and relativism are features of our society. It is not unlike the situation that prevailed in Israel at the time of the Judges, before the authority of the king emerged: *'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit'* (Judges 21:25). If pluralism, individualism and relativism are features of our culture then there is a great need for the church to counter this by animating the biblical world-view in transformed communities. The church must not be a microcosm of the world. *'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind....'* (Rom. 12:2). In a society where rational discourse has failed we ought to manifest the reality of the power of God in radically altered lives.

Nevertheless there is a danger that, in attempting to shape an effective apologetic strategy in a pluralist society, pragmatism will gain the ascendancy and secularise the evangelical church. We should take heed to the warning of Paul to the Galatian Church: *'See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.'* (Col. 2:8).

Increasingly we find that churches are being influenced by postmodernity. Some evangelical churches are becoming theologically foggy and non-doctrinal with an all-inclusive ecclesiology. In such churches there is an appeal to feelings that puts emotionalism at the centre of their practice and this in turn affects preaching and music. Sadly we are beginning to see a consumerist attitude where the church has become a spiritual supermarket and there is a shift of emphasis from truth to technique. In this market-driven and consumer-oriented culture psychology tends to eclipse Christology. Postmodernity trivialises the transcendent truth of the gospel where sin and forgiveness are evacuated of meaning. So it is the role of the church to proclaim and prove these great truths in dialogue and deed.

We need to be seeker-sensitive but not seeker-centred. The desire to be relevant must be subordinate to the obligation to be faithful. Where the desire to be relevant is uppermost unpalatable truths are sidelined as 'unhelpful'. In such circumstances there is an admission that these truths are unmarketable. But we have a message to proclaim and it runs counter to the prevailing world-view.

We should not merely silently model Christlikeness and ignore preaching. That would be a contradiction because Christ engaged in proclamation. We cannot dismiss the word of God as irrelevant in a post-modern society because God says that his word will never be void of power. *'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'* (Isa. 55:10–11). His word must be wielded in preaching as a spiritual weapon. *'For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'* (Heb. 4:12).

Paul's instruction to Timothy applies to us and has not been rescinded. *'Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season...'* (2 Tim.4:2). Yet I think it is important that we are informed about the mindset of people today. It is interesting to note that in the list of people who came to join David in battle at a crucial juncture in the history of Israel we find men who *'understood the times and knew what Israel should do'* (1 Chron.12:32). We need such men today at an equally crucial juncture in the history of God's people.

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (Jn.14:6). *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* (Acts 4:12). These words are no more and no less politically correct than they were in the first century when Jesus and Peter proclaimed them. They may engender the same kind of hostility today as they did then. In seeking to find an apologetic strategy that is contemporary we must be unapologetic about preaching Christ. *'...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...'* (1 Cor. 1:23).

Preaching the cross will always be seen by many as an 'oppressive meta-narrative' because of its universal application. It warns of an ultimate judgement that involves more than just exclusion from the eschatological kingdom. There will be eternal conscious torment in hell for those who do not repent. But the glory of the gospel is that it offers salvation to all that trust in the finished work of Christ alone. To the world our preaching may be merely discredited rhetoric but to us it the honey of heaven. *'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'* (1 Cor. 1:18).

But how we live in our culture is also crucial. Daniel, for example, found himself to be an alien, a displaced person, in Babylon. He made a conscious decision that he would not be overwhelmed by the culture of his day. That is what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do. He was trying to spiritually subjugate God's people so that they would lose their unique identity and become like everybody else. But we read *'But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies.'* (Daniel 1:8). We too must make a conscious decision not to allow the prevailing culture to swallow us.

When John the Baptist was imprisoned and began to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah he sent two messengers to Jesus to inquire if he was really the Christ. It is very interesting to see how Jesus replied. *"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor"* (Lk.7:22). John doubted the deity of Jesus and doubted all that he had preached in heralding the Christ. Jesus does not answer him with abstract words of reassurance. He does not give a theological dissertation on the fulfilment of prophecy in the person and work of Christ. No, he asks the messengers to report on what they have witnessed of the transforming power of God as demonstrated in his miracles. His activity authenticated his authority! To those like John the Baptist who doubt and despair we must be messengers from the Saviour who talk as first hand witnesses of the transforming power of Christ. *'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have*

touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life' (1 Jn.1:1). This is important in a post-modern culture where winning arguments is not so much impossible as irrelevant. The gospel is not just about words of persuasion but also about pointing to evidence of that transforming power and being evidence of that power!

We tend to think that we are ineffective because we are irrelevant and so we strive to be relevant but the truth is where we are irrelevant it is because we are ineffective. Therefore, we ought to focus more on being effective in a world that is deaf and blind and dumb and diseased with sin and lame and lost and dead! Christ was effective and relevant! We have a transforming vision to transmit but if we just talk about how things could be we are falling short. For example we cannot just talk about love we must live it. When reason and rational argument fail we might find that relationship fills the vacuum.

As evangelical churches perhaps we could do more to show the relevance of our faith to our society. Take as an example the fact that many people today are interested in environmental issues. The Christian alone can show that the ultimate ecological ethic is rooted in the creator? Are we failing our society by leaving issues such as these in the hands of new age, secular activists?

It is perfectly reasonable to examine different ways of communicating with our contemporaries. However, we must be careful not to yield to the temptation to market ourselves to 'unchurched' consumers by appealing to their emotions and forsaking the duty to teach people to think biblically. The first strand in our apologetic strategy will be to preach the word of God. The second will be the evidence of our own lives in community relationships. That is a crucial aspect of what a church should be. We are messengers, with a message but we are also models. One of the aims of preaching to our congregations is to enable people to model the message so that God's glory might be mirrored in a world that is stumbling about in post-modern darkness.

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Congregational denomination in England and Wales. The story of its decline from the late 19th century is a salutary one that shows what happens when churches lose their grip on the gospel. Today the ever-shrinking United Reformed Church in this country is one of the worst advertisements for the ecumenical movement and the doctrinally and morally wayward United Church of Christ in the United States is a scandal. Thank God for those evangelical Congregationalists in this country and the United States who are maintaining the faith of their fathers and applying it to the culture in which we live today. A publishing house that is helping to do this is Quinta Press which has recently republished **Geoffrey Nuttall's *Visible Saints, The Congregational Way, 1640–1660*** (Quinta Press 2001). In this classic historical study of Congregationalism Nuttall discusses the essential Congregationalist principles of separation, fellowship, freedom and spiritual fitness. Whether or not you agree with the polity built on these principles, this book helps us to appreciate something of the spiritual dynamic that has animated Congregationalism at its best.