

SECTION 2

ASPECTS OF THE PROCLAMATION

“UNTIL I COME, DEVOTE YOURSELF TO THE
PUBLIC READING OF SCRIPTURE, TO
PREACHING AND TO TEACHING..”

1 TIMOTHY 4:13

APOLOGIZING TO POSTMODERNS: DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE APOLOGETIC FOR CONTEMPORARY GOSPEL PREACHING

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INTRODUCTION

First Peter 3:15 admonishes believers always to be “prepared to make a defense” of the Gospel that gives hope. With that in mind, much has been written to equip Christians to defend our faith—to the point that the field of apologetics has developed into an independent discipline. A number of volumes have also been published concerning the preaching of the Gospel to unbelievers and skeptics. The question before us today, however, concerns the need to synthesize the two, and to do so in a way that will most effectively communicate and defend the Gospel to a contemporary audience. How are we as preachers faithfully to proclaim the life-changing message of Jesus Christ to the media-saturated, pluralistic, skeptical culture in which we find ourselves immersed today?

In order effectively to communicate the Gospel to people in any given culture, it is necessary to understand the philosophical and sociological undercurrents influencing the thought patterns of that culture. And it is necessary to speak their language. While no one could argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition has not had major effects on the West, the reality also exists that significant changes have taken place over the last century that have affected the way people think and perceive the world. The questions arise, then, as to how society has come to the place in which it now finds itself, and how the church is to respond to the changes that have taken place. Has culture changed to the point that the manner in which the faith is defended also needs to change? And if so, what changes are necessary?

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

A time once existed in which most cultures were dominated by what is now referred to as “premodernism.” A premodern culture was marked by little or no diversity or social change. People shared the same values, traditions, and beliefs, and while some such societies still exist in remote regions of the world, those conditions are, especially in the West, rare.¹ Today, pluralism, diversity, and constant change are the norm. Western society is now saturated in what is most commonly referred to as a “postmodern” culture, the diametrical

¹Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 32.

opposite of premodernism, but the shift in sociology and worldview was far from instantaneous (nor is it uniformly complete).

Until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Western culture was predominately a premodern enterprise dominated by the Roman church. However, when the leaders of the Protestant Reformation took their stand against the establishment, one inevitable result was a newfound willingness to question authority. While that in itself was not altogether negative, the reality was that Christianity (which was defined as the Roman church) as a whole had now been destabilized, and the voice of moral objectivity had been undermined.² In a society where the questioning of accepted norms was being discouraged, questioning now became the norm, as no person or institution had exclusive claims to the truth.

At the same time, the Renaissance was taking shape. It is hard now to see just how much one affected the other, but it is clear that they in many ways went hand-in-hand. The term “Renaissance” is French for “rebirth” or “revival,” and the period is so called because of the rebirth of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition as well as a renewed emphasis on learning following the Dark Ages.³ As the Reformation was calling for a biblically based church, Renaissance thinkers were striving to synthesize Greek and Christian thought. The newfound trend of questioning the over all status-quo of society accelerated the shift away from the blind acceptance of authority toward an emphasis on human values and autonomy. The authority of the church, and therefore of the Bible, had officially been undercut.⁴ The church was no longer the source of truth; the individual was. This is what is now referred to as the beginnings of “humanism.”

On the heels of the Renaissance, in the mid seventeenth century, came the “Enlightenment.” While the Renaissance undermined the authority of the church and opened the door for modernist thinking, the Enlightenment is seen as the actual “beachhead of modernism.”⁵ Also called the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment was characterized by a trend toward rationalism. With a de-emphasis and distrust of the concept of divine revelation, rationalists depended on logic, empirical evidence, and scientific discovery in their search for objective truth. Most believed that the natural world held the keys to ultimate reality, and that the essence of reality could only be unlocked through a thorough knowledge of the natural world.⁶ As one person described it, Enlightenment thinkers “presumed that

²Ibid., 34.

³Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 58.

⁴Baker, *Summary of Christian History*, 191, makes a good case that this shift actually aided the Reformation by opening people’s minds to the idea of questioning the authority of the Pope.

⁵Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 35. Grenz says, “The Renaissance laid the foundation for the modern mentality, but it did not erect the superstructure of modernity” (Grenz, *Primer*, 60).

⁶Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 36. Grenz, *Primer*, 61.

there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavors were all about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends.”⁷ And what were those ends? Simply put, the truth.

This is basically the mindset, spurred on by an onslaught of new scientific discoveries and theories of the nineteenth century that characterizes modernism. The modernist believes that truth exists, that there are objective standards for reality and morality, and that those standards can be found in the natural world. Therefore, modernism rejects any concept of divine revelation; faith and reason are seen as diametrically opposed to one another. This was the predominate line of thinking, at least until the 1950's, that fueled the rise in evidentiary apologetics.⁸ After all, if enough objective, empirical evidence could be produced to substantiate the claims of Scripture, then the apologetic task would be complete.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Beginning in the 1950s a different philosophy started emerging—the philosophy of postmodernism. It is important to note, however, that some of its most important ideas were not entirely new to the twentieth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche declared “the death of God,” and he followed suit with a line of reasoning which would affect virtually every area of life. Nietzsche was critical of the modernist quest for universal truth and moral absolutes, arguing that, since those were basically religious concepts, and since religion had been debunked as a viable means of authority, the whole concepts of truth and meaning had no basis. Without God there was no absolute or foundational source of moral law because there was no objective point of reference. This gave birth to “existentialism”—the view that human existence, set within individual contexts, was all there was or could be to reality. Truth, along with God, was dead to the existentialist.⁹

Though Nietzsche’s views did not gain a solid footing initially, the ideas he suggested began to take birth in the latter half of the twentieth century, when postmodernism began to take shape. The “new” philosophy rejected the most basic tenet of modernist thought—namely that objective truth could be known. While, as one anthropologist explains, the modernist “does not believe in the availability of a substantive, final, world-transcending

⁷David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 27-28.

⁸The term “evidentiary apologetics” refers to any form of apologetics that depends on empirical evidences to prove, support, or give credibility to any of the truth-claims of the faith.

⁹Groothuis identifies Nietzsche as the most likely candidate to be named the “one philosopher who marks the transition from modernism to postmodernism” (Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 37).

Revelation,” he “does believe in the existence of knowledge which transcends culture.”¹⁰ The postmodernist rejects all claims to ultimate transcendent truth, claiming instead that one’s own personal experience is all anyone can ever really know.¹¹ Doug Groothuis states that to the postmodern, “the very idea of absolute, objective and universal truth is considered implausible, held in open contempt or not even seriously considered.”¹²

This new emphasis on subjectivism is a defining characteristic of postmodernism. In fact, the postmodernist would say that the only truth there is (not defined as objective truth) is whatever one determines to be truth, based on one’s own culture and perception.¹³ Indeed it would seem that the primary difference between modernism and postmodernism is the difference between absolutism and relativism.¹⁴ As J. I. Packer put it, the postmodernist says, “What I feel is all that counts because what I feel is all there is.”¹⁵

Many factors have led to the rise and acceptance of postmodernism, including but not limited to the following: (1) Modernism failed to provide all of life’s answers through knowledge and technological mastery. (2) Pluralism lends itself to the unacceptability of one true religion. (3) Diversity has blurred the lines, making all lifestyles and values equally valid. (4) Language is believed to be a human creation, thus not representing reality. (5) Verifiable evidence cannot objectively determine truth.¹⁶ These all represent a frustration among postmoderns, who have in essence given up on Truth itself. Therefore, how must preachers respond in order most effectively to communicate the truth claims of Christianity? Will the same methods used in a modern context work in a postmodern context? Or is a shift in apologetics in order?

PREACHING TO THE TIMES: A NEW RELIGION OR A NEW KIND OF LANGUAGE?

Postmodernism presents a significant shift in thinking in western culture. The modernist mindset, believing in the existence of objective truth which could be discovered

¹⁰Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75-76.

¹¹Grenz, *Primer*, 83.

¹²Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 22.

¹³David L. Goetz, “The Riddle of Our Postmodern Culture: What Is Postmodernism? Should We Even Care?” *Leadership* 18 (1997): 54.

¹⁴F. LeRon Shults, “Structures of Rationality in Science and Theology: Overcoming the Postmodern Dilemma,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 49 (1997): 228-36.

¹⁵J. I. Packer, as quoted in Goetz, “Riddle,” 56.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 26-31. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Westminster, 1998), 83-84.

through empirical evidences, is no longer prevalent. This is not to say that modernism has ceased to exist. Indeed, there are many factors that can determine a person's worldview. For example, elderly people and people raised in rural settings further removed from the influences of postmodern ideology will likely have a more modern worldview than those in their twenties raised in cities (particularly cities outside of the "Bible Belt"). Also, people with scientific backgrounds might be more influenced by empirical evidence than someone with a liberal arts degree, and those educated in liberal, secular universities might tend more toward relativism than those with only a high school education or those educated in more conservative private institutions. Nevertheless, that postmodernism has significantly transformed the contemporary worldview is undeniable.

In addition, while the contemporary pastor in a more traditional setting might think that his converted congregants are not in need of apologetics—or at the very least, that they still see the world through modernist lenses that filter out all the gray areas—nothing could be farther from the truth. Calvin Miller notes that “people who attend church have no forum for expressing their diverse views and none are given polygraph tests to be sure they agree with creeds. But many of them don’t.”¹⁷ Further, in his book *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, Graham Johnston contends that postmodernism is “shared by those folks who fill church sanctuaries each Sunday.”¹⁸ To assume that contemporary pews are filled with committed believers who unquestionably accept our confessional statements and everything we preachers say would be to exhibit a naiveté that will leave our listeners wondering if we really even understand who they are.

The challenge, then, is for the preacher today to lean to understand his context. Who exactly are the members of his audience, and how do they think? Craig Loscalzo acknowledges the difficulty in trying concretely to define “postmodernism.” After all, “one characteristic of postmodernism is its intentional willingness not to objectify anything.”¹⁹ How can the church communicate effectively to those who reject modernism's rationalism and objectivity? The difficulty is in presenting the exclusive truth-claims and the call to the lordship of Christ to those who embrace relativism and embody suspicion. Yet, Loscalzo says, “Only a pulpit that identifies with the milieu of the time will be heard over the babble of other voices demanding people's attention.”²⁰ Therefore, the effective preacher must learn to connect with his listeners, and to do so will require him to reclaim “the apologetic role of the pulpit for the cause of the Christian faith.”²¹

¹⁷Calvin Miller, *Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 44.

¹⁸Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 9.

¹⁹Craig Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 26.

²⁰Loscalzo, 20.

²¹Ibid., 23.

In order to apologize in a postmodern climate, Loscalzo contends that certain elements need to be present in apologetic preaching. Stories, or image-rich narratives will help present the Gospel and make it clear.²² The preacher must also provide theological content. Not to do so “ranks paramount to ministerial malpractice and should not be tolerated.”²³ In addition, preachers must be willing to “take on rival systems,” particularly with respect to providing answers to questions of theodicy, sin, salvation, and other issues which can become obstacles to faith.²⁴ Loscalzo also contends that to reach the postmodern, as opposed to the modernist, preaching must contain an element of mystery and transcendence, not trying to provide all the answers with raw data and technology.²⁵ Preachers need to offer the hope of the Gospel²⁶ and the certainty of truth, even though postmoderns reject the notion of objective truth.²⁷ Ultimately, however, the greatest necessity in apologetic preaching is the preaching of Jesus Christ. The focus of preaching is not a church or a theological system, but the person of Jesus Christ Himself, so the apologetic preacher must explain to the world the “who” and the “why” of Jesus the Christ.

In *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, Johnston acknowledges that even within the church, many people hold to a postmodern worldview. Therefore, he encourages the biblical expositor to learn to communicate in such a way as to connect with his contemporary listeners.²⁸ Even in the pew on Sunday, he contends, there will be skeptics, so he issues a strong call for pulpit apologetics. He defines “apologetic preaching” as “biblical preaching that grapples with doubts, unpacks Christian assumptions, and contemplates the unbelief of the skeptic.”²⁹ The preacher who has still not grasped the most common differences between modernity and postmodernity will have a difficult time communicating with contemporary Christians, much less those who have yet to accept the basic claims of the faith.

²²Ibid., 22. Loscalzo is not necessarily advocating a narrative form of preaching as much as he is contending for the use of narratives during the course of preaching, regardless of the specific form or style of the sermon.

²³Loscalzo, 25. He states, “Whether by intentional design or by default we pastors have relegated our task of being a theologian to some unknown entity while we spend our energy on matters that someone else in the church could better handle,”

²⁴Loscalzo, 26-27.

²⁵Ibid., 29.

²⁶Ibid., 54.

²⁷Ibid., 84.

²⁸Johnston, 9.

²⁹Ibid., 82.

In a compilation work called *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, Zacharias sums up the problem faced in Gospel preaching today with the question, “How do we communicate the gospel to a generation that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?”³⁰ Despite the overwhelming call to answer that challenge with purely technological and visual means, however, Zacharias displays a faith in the written Word of God, bemoaning the “loss of linguistic strength in our time,” urging the preacher not to abandon the preaching of that Word.³¹

In answer to the question of how truth is communicated today, Zacharias provides five points for the evangelistic preacher to consider. First, because of the lack of confidence in any kind of authority, postmodernism has “cleared the playing field.” Confidence has become so scarce that there is a deep spiritual hunger for something solid in which to believe.³² This provides an enormous opportunity for the claims of the Gospel.³³ Second, while “classical techniques don’t work anymore,” there is “just enough of the modern worldview left so that reason still has a point of entry.” Care should be taken not to engage in “an overdose of argumentation,” but rational discussion and truth assertions need not be cast aside.³⁴

Third, postmoderns long for community, and the “gospel message that culminates in worship . . . brings coherence within the community of believers.” The church provides something unique in that “a worshipping community binds [our] diversity . . . and brings us together into a corporate expression of worship,” which is “one of the most powerful appeals to the postmodern mind.”³⁵

“Fourth,” he says, “we must be observant of God’s sovereign intervention in history.” In other words, we need to seize upon local, national, or global events that will provide opportunity for the Gospel. Certain events cause people to question and search, and the effective evangelistic preacher will speak truth into those situations, providing answers for the longing soul. Finally, postmoderns are “exhausted [by] this indulgent culture.” Evangelistic preaching does not need to make promises of ease, but be honest

³⁰Ravi Zacharias, in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 26.

³¹Ibid., 43.

³²See also, Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville: Word, 2000): “Philosophically, you can believe anything. . . . Morally, you can practice anything. . . . Religiously, you can hold to anything” (vii).

³³Zacharias, *Telling the Truth*, 26.

³⁴Ibid., 27.

³⁵Ibid., 27.

about the cost of following Christ.”³⁶ This concept contradicts the pragmatism employed by so many preachers and evangelists today, but Zacharias argues that this is the kind of preaching that will resonate with the postmodern.

In the same work, Colin Smith contends for the centrality of Jesus Christ in preaching to postmoderns, and not just “disconnected truths about peace or fulfillment or family life.”³⁷ Even though those things certainly will be spoken of, every application presented must be connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ. He sees Jesus as central to Scripture, to preaching, and to the Gospel, so any true Christian preaching ultimately must be focused on Him. In the current *zeitgeist*, pragmatism dominates many pulpits, but even for the contemporary unbeliever, the preacher must not forget that his task is to proclaim Jesus Christ to all who hear.³⁸

A song currently being played at your local Starbucks gives voice to the heart cry of contemporary culture:

*Give me some new religion;
Something that I can feel.
Give me some new tomorrow;
Bring it on and make it real.
Drown it in sweet forgiveness;
Come on, baby, to my life.*³⁹

The Gospel preacher, however, will recognize that a new religion is not what people are longing for. Instead, it is the very real offer of a new tomorrow and the sweet forgiveness that is only available in Jesus Christ. “Give me Jesus,” is their plea, but we must first learn how to understand and speak their language if we are to give them what they need.

CONCLUSION

The last sixty years have seen some dramatic shifts in culture. The contemporary audience is more skeptical today, pluralism is prevalent, and truth is seen as subjective. A significant number of our listeners, though perhaps still possessing some remnants of modernist thought, are steeped in a postmodern worldview. Because of that, preachers seeking to reach unbelievers with the Gospel must endeavor to understand the foundations

³⁶Ibid., 27-28.

³⁷Colin Smith, in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 112.

³⁸John R. W. Stott, in *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982: the church has lost its confidence in the Gospel, and that it must reclaim that confidence. Preachers do not need to find an adequate or attractive substitute, as there really is none (83-85).

³⁹“New Religion.” Words by Alex Dickson. Recorded by Alice Smith.

and ramifications of postmodern thought. That understanding should inform the proclamation of the Gospel—not the Gospel itself, but the substance of the argumentation used. There have always been skeptics, but the skepticism of today questions the veracity of the Bible and even the historical reality of Jesus. Therefore, when the truth claims of the Gospel are presented, we will need to develop an apologetic for defending those claims that arises from an understanding of how objective truth is viewed by a contemporary audience. As Loscalzo says, “In the current climate of pluralism and relativism—what one might call a neopagan culture—the ground for evangelism will have to be properly furrowed and prepared by effective apologetics.”⁴⁰

The shift in thinking demands a shift in apologetic method from the manner of that used in a modernist culture, however. Evidentiary apologetics will be ineffective with an audience that places no value in empirical data. Subjectivism rules the day. As Ravi Zacharias says, the contemporary generation “hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings.”⁴¹ Therefore, we must learn to use stories, both contemporary and historical, that will connect with the listeners on an emotional level. This does not mean, however, that preachers of the Gospel should shrink from declaring the truth-claims of Scripture. Instead, there are certain elements that need to be present in the apologetic used in contemporary evangelistic preaching.

To begin with, Jesus Christ must be proclaimed as the Son of God and unique Savior of the World. He is not one god among many. He is the only God, and to fail to proclaim Him as such is to fail to proclaim the Gospel. Similarly, even though postmodern listeners are skeptical of absolute truth-claims, the Christian faith is based on them, and in an age when nothing is certain, the preacher of the Gospel has the opportunity to be the one person in the community to provide solid answers to a confused generation.

When developing an apologetic for preaching, however, preachers need not pretend to know all the answers or to be able to answer life’s most difficult questions with simple propositions. Postmoderns are not looking for pat answers, but they are comfortable with mystery. Therefore, when there is mystery—when the questions being raised are beyond knowing—an effective contemporary apologetic will embrace that mystery rather than try to dispel it.

In addition, though it is politically incorrect to criticize most belief systems and philosophies today, evangelistic preachers must confront the errors of the day. This is done by addressing the underlying assumptions—the foundational presuppositions—and showing, not only the inherent flaws, but also the superiority of the Christian faith. Preachers need to be able to explain to their listeners how Christianity is the only faith system that can meet their deepest needs and how all other systems consistently fail to do so. A word of caution, however, is that the preacher must never be seen as arrogant or uncaring, but he should

⁴⁰Loscalzo, 125.

⁴¹Zacharias, *Telling the Truth*, 82.

present his argument with gentleness and humility, because, as Zacharias says, “We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface.”⁴²

Finally, because the postmodern is typically wary of superficiality and materialism, and because he frequently sees Christianity as making shallow external promises, the Gospel should not be presented as a means to leisure or luxury. Honesty and transparency are important to the postmodern, so the preacher that connects is the one who is forthright in communicating the costs of following Christ and the struggles of discipleship. Since the Gospel itself makes no promises of ease, neither should the Gospel preacher. Contemporary apologetics need not “enhance” the Gospel to make it more pleasing, but should rather preach Jesus as the One who lays claim to the entire life of His follower and bids him “take up his cross.”

⁴²Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, vii.