

Preaching in a postmodern world

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Preaching in a postmodern world

Introduction

In this essay I would like to compare and evaluate the opinions of different authors on certain themes of the postmodern world: Development Towards the Postmodern, Authority, Truth, Community, and God in a Postmodern World. Then, before reaching a conclusion, I will consider how these themes influence theology, the church and preaching. Discussions on postmodernity often focus on the differences between the popular and the academic approach, but in this essay I will be looking more at the similarities between these.

Premodern, modern and postmodern

Throughout history ideologies have been shaped by the three worldviews labelled by R. J. Allen as the premodern, the modern and the postmodern¹. The latter forms a basis for various theological views as deconstructionist, postliberal, revisionist and others, and these are discussed by Ronald Allen, Barbara Blaisdell and Scott Johnston in their book 'Theology for Preaching'². The differing worldviews of the premodern, modern and the postmodern represent a challenge to our contemporary preaching.

To clarify more the three attitudes, generally we may say: Premodern respects a divine reality, cosmic meaning, where all things are related to one another, it respects the natural world and it is convinced that nature has its own integrity. Postmodernity rebirths some of these attitudes and (in contrast to

¹ R.J. Allen, B.S. Blaisdell and S.B. Johnston (eds.), *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 15

² Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 17-19

modern thinking) shows that 'all perception involves interpretation'³, that there is relativity of all knowledge. It may be positive, it may even trust reality in the way the Bible understands it⁴, but at the same time it 'acknowledges no universals'⁵ in its radical expression. Postmodernity stands in contrast to the modernist respect for science, logic and the common belief that 'one could achieve objective knowledge that is valid in every time and place'⁶ through 'empirical observation or logical deduction'⁷. But this does not necessarily always imply that postmodernity cannot have great respect for of the conclusions of modernist thinking⁸.

The term *postmodernism* itself has no exact definition. Different scholars come with different descriptions. It presents an idea of the 'relativity of all human thinking and acting'⁹ and in its popular form shows how 'people understand the world'¹⁰. Postmodernity shifts concepts like reason, science, reality and absoluteness out of their accepted positions which they had occupied during the age of modernism. It stresses other values like community, conversation and respect for difference¹¹. In his book 'Threshold of the Future' Michael Riddell calls 'postmodernism' a slippery word and finds very little meaning in the term itself¹². It seems that without the possibility of comparing the term to *modernity* it stays powerless and without real meaning. Riddell considers the term *postmodernism* to be of equal importance to *emerging culture*, whatever that means. The modernist culture is drawing to a close and postmodernism is emerging in its place¹³. If Allen's conception of postmodernity is ill-defined, then, in my opinion, this definition by Michael Riddell is even more so:

³ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 17

⁴ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 22

⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 17

⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 16

⁷ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 16

⁸ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 20

⁹ C. W. Allen, *Contemporary Theology*, (unpublished paper), no page number given, in Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 10

¹⁰ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 10

¹¹ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 9-10

¹² M. Riddell, *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in the post-Christian West* (London: SPCK, 1998), p. 101

¹³ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 102

We stand on the threshold of the future, looking across the border. Spies have been sent out, and have come back with mixed reports. Perhaps this is a territory of danger and tyranny; perhaps it is the promised land.¹⁴

Most of the authors define *modernism* and on that basis they can then simply define *postmodernism* in terms of the logical and semantic meaning of its prefix. This approach is understandable. It is fairly easy to describe the modern world because we have already experienced it in our past. Defining the postmodern world, however, is obviously more of a challenge because this involves observing both the present and the future. This means that all our descriptions may be in some measure uncertain or even risky¹⁵. To this I would add an interesting comment from David Lose who plays with the term *postmodern* and asks how things could be post-modern if we still equate the term *modern* with *contemporary*? When we concentrate on the 'post-' prefix we see two meanings. Firstly 'leaving behind'; here obviously in the sense of leaving modernity behind, and secondly 'following after'; indicating the continuity of the two epochs rather than the discontinuities¹⁶.

Postmodernity strongly respects diversity but at the same time it puts a question before us: Where are the limits for such diversity? In its most radical expression, known as deconstructuralism, postmodernity seems to inevitably lead to a kind of ideological vacuum, which may be dangerous and even open doors to something totally opposite to respect - to absolutism¹⁷. But on the other hand there is the positive appreciation of history, including biblical history, which is caused by a general 'respect for the past and for the guidance it may offer

¹⁴ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 102

¹⁵ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 103

¹⁶ D. J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 8

¹⁷ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 18

us'¹⁸. It is obvious that it would be impossible and untenable to suggest that humanity tries to live without any kind of boundaries.

Authority

As a starting point for discussing the broad concept that postmodernity encompasses, let us consider the issue of authority.

To the postmodern mind, a person's claim to authority does not automatically give them credibility. Graham Johnston points out that people no longer have automatic trust in authority figures, or even in the very idea of them.¹⁹ They have been deceived by traditional representatives of authority in a variety of offices. Craig Loscalzo gives such a list: 'Bosses at work take advantage of them, merchants take advantage of them, governments take advantage of them.'²⁰ To this we could add a whole host of traditional authority figure whom we no longer instinctively trust: doctors, police, teachers and so on. Loscalzo makes the point emphatically in his 'Apologetic Preaching' with a chapter title which encapsulates this postmodern attitude called 'I Doubt, Therefore I Am'²¹. The title itself shows clearly the experience of many in the postmodern world.

To strengthen his argument, Johnston uses as an illustration the example of Christopher Columbus. While he was celebrated by western, modern people as triumphant liberator, Columbus is condemned in postmodern circles because of his treatment of the native people of America, seen as somebody who destroyed the paradise with 'cruelty, lies, oppression and genocide'²². In a similar

¹⁸ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 22

¹⁹ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), p.

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²⁰ Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p. 19

²¹ Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching*, p. 19

²² Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 32

way today, postmodernism highly respects groups similar to the indigenous people of America mentioned above, such as other indigenous peoples, women, children and the homeless. Everyone is equal today and deserves equal respect and tolerance²³. This is an obvious illustration of the shifting views on authority. Some people even no longer trust some historical events like the holocaust, so it cannot be expected they will accept the fact of the resurrection²⁴.

Similarly when it comes to preaching we cannot count on the biblical tradition as a source of authority. S. B. Johnston summarizes that authority today has two sources, Christ and the community²⁵. A wise communicator will find and will respect the 'congregation's particularities'²⁶. By doing this they obtain authority from the congregation. Nor does it does not mean they must compromise the message of the gospel. The congregation hears an authentic and complete picture about Christ, but at the same time the message is relevant to them as it refers to the congregation's particularities²⁷. This leads us to the second theme of the postmodern world, that of truth.

Truth

The origin of our attitude towards truth is not necessarily related to the rise of modern science, as would possibly be anticipated, but has its roots in the Greek culture that was revived during the time of the Reformation and especially in the Renaissance. Leslie Newbigin believed that in the humanist tradition there were two main ways of finding truth²⁸. The first was human reason, considered sufficient by itself as a tool through which truth may be discovered. The second was the human spirit when it connects with 'the ultimate source of being and

²³ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 32

²⁴ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 33

²⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 56-57

²⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 56

²⁷ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 56-57

²⁸ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 2

truth²⁹. Newbigin observed, then the truth we can learn from history is not really respected because historical events are accidental and cannot serve as an ultimate source of knowledge³⁰.

This is interesting when compared to Lose's summary on modernism, which is also expressed in two ways, these being rationalism and empiricism³¹. Firstly, rationalism doubts every experience and finally the only real thing is our existence. Descartes expresses it by his 'Cogito, ergo sum'. From this point of view the certainty is in our minds, we are able to define the 'first truths' and use them to see the world around us correctly. Secondly, empiricism says that our thinking is conditioned by our experience and because of that our experience needs to be carefully verified³². Ronald Allen confirms this view and explains that empiricism verifies its truths 'through one of the five senses'³³.

When comparing Lose and Newbigin we can see some similarities in the modernist understanding of finding truth. The two main tools used for this purpose seem to be the human reason and human experience, and both may be conditioned. Martin Robinson concludes that the understanding of truth as an ultimate and absolute issue was not definite even in modernity, where the concept of relative pluralism was already present. It was connected to values and morality, but postmodernity extends relativism 'to the whole of life'³⁴. These observations help us to understand that the line between modernism and postmodernism, and their respective ways of finding truth, is not so clear. From Ronald Allen's perspective, aspects of postmodernism were already forming in modernism. 'Postmodernism seeks to transcend modernism.'³⁵

²⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 2

³⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 2

³¹ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 9

³² Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, pp. 9-10

³³ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 16

³⁴ M. Robinson, 'Post What? Renewing Our Minds in a Postmodern World', *On Being* 24.2 (March 1997), pp. 28-32 [30]

³⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 17

Considering the truth in the postmodern ethos, Graham Johnston observes that it is not objective; truth becomes truth when someone perceives it to be truth for themselves. It cannot be objective because it is always influenced by subjective understandings and presuppositions³⁶. Here is a suitable illustration given by W. T. Anderson which shows three different attitudes of the modern, main postmodern and radical postmodern approach:

Three home plate umpires in baseball explain their philosophy of umpiring: One says, 'There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are.' Another responds, 'There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em.' The third says, 'There's balls and there's strikes and ain't nothing until I call 'em.'³⁷

Moreover David Lose shows that in the eyes of postmodern critics, the decision about what is reality and what is truth depends on the view of a specific community³⁸. This view is much wider than that of Anderson's three baseball umpires, where every time there is the point of view of just one person. Lose pictures the view of a specific community and uses Hans Christian Andersen's story 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. This story relates to the postmodern view that what is regarded as truth or a good thing is dependent on 'convenient assumptions that we have agreed not to question'³⁹. Such assumptions are highly respected as 'self-evident'⁴⁰ and 'eternally true'⁴¹ and may lead to them obtaining a privileged position over all others.

Leslie Newbigin explains how society may form these assumptions. He defines a pluralist society as one 'in which there is no officially approved pattern

³⁶ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 29

³⁷ W.T. Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 75

³⁸ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 20

³⁹ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 13

⁴⁰ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 14

⁴¹ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 14

of belief or conduct⁴². The authority of these long-standing truths is no longer derived from the fact that we have such truths, but much more from their critical examination by society. So it becomes essential to be sure, as far as possible, that the critique and judgement of society is based on valid arguments⁴³.

Michael Riddell points out a weakness of such judgement: that our society may be more interested in what it sees, experiences and considers 'authentic'⁴⁴. As an extreme expression we could say: 'An experience on drugs may be "real", while a lecture on thermodynamics is not'⁴⁵. But this is a really extreme example and hopefully quite faraway from a judgement we would expect from the 'critical examination' mentioned above. A more appropriate and balanced position on this comes from Graham Johnston who states: 'When someone claims to know the truth, postmodernity asks, "What is your angle?"'⁴⁶

Most western people would recognise that our laws generally mirror Christian moral principles. There may be discussion as to the exact extent, and how well these principles are applied, but basically we are used to living with a feeling that there is an objective truth about what is righteous and what is not. Postmodernism loses this dependence on objective truth. Graham Johnston reminds us of one of the pioneering concepts of postmodernism, where everything objective becomes nothing more than 'a human construct'⁴⁷. Truth and reason are no longer considered to be 'morally neutral'⁴⁸.

Newbiggin continues the debate about truth and distinguishes between fact and dogma. Fact is that which 'can stand up under the critical examination of the modern scientific method'⁴⁹, while dogma is 'given by an authority and received

⁴² Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 1

⁴³ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 1

⁴⁴ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 113

⁴⁵ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 113

⁴⁶ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 32

⁴⁷ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 31

⁴⁸ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 31

⁴⁹ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 5

in faith⁵⁰. Although people may understand Christianity as dogma, and as such it has been shared throughout the centuries, Christianity is ultimately built on the Christ of history, meaning the facts about Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. But even as dogma, Christianity is unique in that it carries a code of grace in its essence⁵¹. The principle of grace operates in the context of what is righteous and that brings us to the consideration of what is right, and finally what is not right. Such a conception of truth does not allow much space for other opinions or personal choices of values – there is only one truth, based factually and shared dogmatically.

Our world separates Christian dogma from its historical fact and as such considers Christianity worthy of attention as 'simply one of many brands available in the ideological supermarket'⁵². But careful examination shows that every dogma has its beginnings at some point and for some reason. How serious then, were these beginnings and reasons for Christianity? And how much is our modern or postmodern observation of reality aware of 'the social conditioning of belief'⁵³? And finally, what of those who say that 'the truth is much greater than any one person can grasp'⁵⁴? This may appear humble, but can in fact be used as a simple excuse to deny said truth⁵⁵.

This discussion on dogma is expressed better, in my opinion, by David Lose, whose approach is determined by the concept he used to shape his book, and that is *confession*⁵⁶. Although *confession* and *dogma* do not seem to be parallel themes, I would say that they intersect at the point of Christian experience, where faith is lived and shared practically. While Newbiggin finds weaknesses of truth shared through dogma, Lose points to advantages of truth shared through confession. Here we go back to his definition of *confession*, that

⁵⁰ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 5

⁵¹ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 6

⁵² Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 7

⁵³ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 9

⁵⁴ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 9

⁵⁵ Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 9

⁵⁶ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 3

'Christian claims can rest upon no ultimate foundation' but 'Christianity exists solely by confession, the conviction and assertion of revealed truth apart from any appeal to another criterion'. So 'we live...always by faith alone'⁵⁷. Yes, sharing faith through confession brings some tension as we share a 'ragged kind of truth, a truth that is never complete'⁵⁸, a truth which is shared on the basis of our deepest convictions. The articulation of our faith this way allows us to share it in the postmodern context⁵⁹.

I have considered some approaches to defining the concept of truth. Through evaluating the opinions of different authors I have examined the role of reason and experience as a modernism heritage, and also the role of the individual and community in forming truth, and finally I have outlined an appropriate way how to share truth through the confessing of Jesus Christ. Now I would like to turn my attention to the role of the community in the postmodern world.

Community (and the individual)

As we have seen in the section above, in the postmodern ethos truth depends on how society conceives it. According to David Lose postmodernists stress that there should be 'no one idea or voice privileged over the rest'⁶⁰. The intention of this is not to create anarchy but to avoid foundationalism which limits people by fixing them just on one truth. The way to do this is to express what is good but express it locally and temporally, not globally and permanently, and dependent on the local community. At the same time postmodernists hold society

⁵⁷ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 62

⁵⁸ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, pp. 61-62

⁵⁹ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, pp. 61-62

⁶⁰ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 17

responsible for 'the world it produces'⁶¹. People themselves create their reality and therefore are responsible for it, either good or bad.

Graham Johnston confirms the reluctance of postmodern communities to trust in big stories which claim to answer all the questions of human existence and which widely transcend the local context. A narrative such as these 'claims more than it can possibly know...'⁶². Such narratives may be dangerous because they gives only one general world-view, and may not be applicable to the particular needs of any individual, leading to the possibility of injustice⁶³.

Ronald Allen discusses the sources of these communal feelings in our western context⁶⁴. We want to decide who we are and what we do, and we can realize this within a community. In some ways we come back to the premodern conception of the 'corporate personality'⁶⁵ but not losing the modernist heritage of strong individualism. With both attitudes we enter the postmodern atmosphere where 'the one is included in the many; the one is more than its individuality'⁶⁶ and where 'Acting for the other's good is at the same time acting for one's own good'⁶⁷.

To this I would add a few observations form Michael Riddel⁶⁸ on some practical issues in which our world differs from the premodern and modern one. He believes that there may still be some obstacles to the way in which 'plurality and diversity of different communities'⁶⁹ is respected while 'individuals become all that they can'⁷⁰ at the same time. Most people live in cities where they adopt 'the

⁶¹ Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, p. 19

⁶² Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, pp. 32-33

⁶³ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, pp. 32-33

⁶⁴ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 137-142

⁶⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 141

⁶⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 141

⁶⁷ M. Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, Rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 78-79

⁶⁸ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, pp. 103-104

⁶⁹ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 140

⁷⁰ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 140

culture of cities'⁷¹ and the 'culture of urbanism'⁷². It is no longer the rural context influencing the communities' values but urban. Different people move from different parts of the country or world to create new communities. This brings anonymity, the danger of functional relationships with workmates or people offering services, and the greater possibility of structural injustice. But on the other hand there is something Riddell calls the 'retractable psyche'⁷³, caused by stress, producing a desire to save one's identity and leading to 'the formation of subcultures'⁷⁴ where people can find a place of belonging.

The authors whose views I have discussed in this section on community agree that the significance of the individual in the postmodern world is more dependent on community. But they present no unified opinion on exactly how easy it is to make this connection with a community. But at least we can see that people's world-view is generally more communal. As a result when we preach in this context we find that the congregation is a significant source of authority (this corresponds with what was said above in the section about authority). Finally, the idea of community as a social aspect of postmodernity leads to the more theological aspect, namely God.

God

To better understand the postmodern view of God, let us first consider what Ronald Allen outlines as the modernist view⁷⁵. Some people deny the very idea of a supernatural God and bring his existence down to the mundane and purely natural. Others try to harmonize the historical events in the Bible with help of, for example, archaeology. It seems that in the modernist approach, in most cases the common denominator is a quite simple solution to the problem, which

⁷¹ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 103

⁷² Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 103

⁷³ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 104

⁷⁴ Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*, p. 104

⁷⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 111-114

is much more challenging than the premodern approach⁷⁶. This simplicity is not necessarily demanded in postmodernism, where many different approaches are respected. Some value the historicity and the doctrinal strength of the Bible. Others depend more on Church traditions and still others come with quite strange ideas of how they see God, even mixing Christianity with New Age or other religions⁷⁷.

To switch from abstract terms to a concrete example, Graham Johnston illustrates the difference between modernism and postmodernism this way: Jesus' declaration 'I am the resurrection' is a problem for the modern approach because the idea of resurrection is supernatural and contrary to science⁷⁸. The same declaration is also a problem for the postmodern approach, but for a different reason: Jesus' 'I am' is totally exclusive. There is no problem with the 'possibility of a resurrection'⁷⁹ because our world is 'unpredictable'⁸⁰ enough to allow for this possibility, should someone want it. But the main values of postmodernity, inclusiveness and openness, can hardly accept such an exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way to God⁸¹.

Finally, Allen suggests a bipolar approach towards God. On one hand there is God's divine love which reveals him to people and results in a close relationship with them⁸². On the other hand God's love towards all people requires justice from person to person so that all can live in peace. Allen believes that this concept respects both the postmodern ethos and the Christian tradition, with its fundamental demands⁸³. This view may serve as a useful tool for postmodern preachers who try to communicate in a world full of such diverse views of God.

⁷⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 112

⁷⁷ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 114

⁷⁸ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 96

⁷⁹ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, pp. 95-96

⁸⁰ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, pp. 95-96

⁸¹ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, pp. 95-96

⁸² Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 115-116

⁸³ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 114-115

Contemporary Preaching

We have discussed the building blocks of postmodernity and now we will consider the influence these attitudes may have on contemporary preaching. Who are the people we preach to today? They include the modern, the postmodern, those who refuse to identify with either label, and those who just don't know. We preach to a mixed community⁸⁴.

Barbara Blaisdell explains the growing hunger in our postmodern culture for ancient traditions⁸⁵. In the past people tried to find wisdom in science but it simply didn't work. Their hope is now directed towards experiences of the ancient mystical rituals and traditions. People today are individualists with carefully built value systems. They are open to other opinions but because they choose to be, and not because authority figures or institutions impress these opinions on them.

An interesting fact emerges: Although there may be strong individuals living around us, their values are often somehow unfocused, not clearly articulated. Maybe these people do not even want to articulate their values clearly. But some of these people want to understand their values and make sense of them. Their failure to do so leads to a shallow experience of life. But at the same time these people desire to live 'self-fulfilling and authentic lives'⁸⁶. They desire this so much that often it is considered acceptable to sacrifice precious relationships for the sake of their career.

This creates a space where suitable preaching may help significantly. Firstly by helping people to discover their 'unrecognised needs'⁸⁷ by correlating

⁸⁴ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 10

⁸⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 24

⁸⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 27

⁸⁷ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 26

them with the gospel. Secondly such preaching may help to articulate - again in the light of the gospel - the values already desired. Thirdly a hope is built that these truths will lead them to live the lives they desire⁸⁸.

S. B. Johnston describes some postmodern discussions as 'from being unnaturally light-hearted to being painfully urgent'⁸⁹. Similarly people try to find some rules that may help them to understand what is happening around them. Instead of finding certainty in the modernist sense, people become 'post-certain'⁹⁰. It is hard to really accurately define words like truth, grace or justice any longer. In the ideological struggle the absolute is losing out in favour of the historical context⁹¹.

So here a crucial and expected question arises: how can the gospel connect with, contribute to, or resolve this situation. One answer was given by Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, who saw the solution in preaching that connects with the context of the hearers⁹². Understanding the needs of hearers leads preachers to 'retell the Christian story for our time'⁹³. S. B. Johnston explains that postmodernity does not rest on 'anthropological foundations'⁹⁴ but much more on tradition and stories connected to a tradition. There is no doubt that Christianity carries a notable and influential story. So when we have feelings of powerlessness, seeing postmodernity as 'antithetical to Christian doctrine'⁹⁵, the 'story' aspect of Christianity shows the way for effective sharing. And at the same time it serves as a good basis for another category – faith⁹⁶. There is some logic, meaning and integrity; even if it cannot be tested by scientific examination in the modern sense.

⁸⁸ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 27

⁸⁹ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 28

⁹⁰ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 28

⁹¹ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 29

⁹² K. Barth, *Word of God and Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 108

⁹³ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 29

⁹⁴ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, pp. 30-31

⁹⁵ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 30

⁹⁶ Allen et. al., *Theology for Preaching*, p. 31

Furthermore postmodernity brings back the virtue of faith, which modernity rejected as less important or even non-existent. Graham Johnston shows that faith is needed again to nurture our spirit. I would not necessary support his opinion that 'people will now seek faith without definition'⁹⁷. They understand faith in their own way but behind their faith there is some kind of story which shaped their values. Contemporary preaching should connect the Christian story with the stories that people have experienced or been influenced by. This was evidently Jesus' way of connecting with people.

At this late stage in this essay I would like to add an interesting observation from an author I have not mentioned yet, Dave Tomlinson. In his book 'The Post-Evangelical' he explains that in preaching to postmodern communities we do not need to compromise Christian standards, yet it may seem that we 'work' with a more relative expression of truth⁹⁸. His view may be seen as liberal and compromised by some in evangelical circles (Tomlinson's book is basically a reaction to the evangelical perspective) but 'the issue is probably more to do with differences of comprehension or perception, it is not so much a matter of differences of opinion as differences in the way opinions are reached'⁹⁹. This may be a wise consideration before I proceed to the conclusion.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the various opinions of the different authors I have chosen, and limited by the scope of this essay, I would like to suggest a few conclusions about preaching in the postmodern world. Firstly, the issue of its relationship towards modernism. In the view of some authors, modernism relates to, transforms into, or even results in postmodernism, while others stress its

⁹⁷ Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, p. 31

⁹⁸ D. Tomlinson, *The Post- Evangelical* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 87-88

⁹⁹ Tomlinson, *The Post- Evangelical*, pp. 87-88

discontinuity. All of the authors cited in this essay agree that postmodernism is a reaction to modernism, but some show its connection to premodernism. Some regard history and tradition to be an important foundation for postmodern people, while some do not find it very helpful in trying to orientate to the postmodern world. Some march confidently into the future with a positive expectation while others are not so sure and express a concern.

Secondly, in regard to what has just been said, there are some consequences for preaching in a postmodern world. Generally said, people become 'post-certain'. But preaching may help them to articulate the values they desire and this may be done in the light of the gospel. We can no longer depend on a generalization of the truth. The Christian gospel has its stories, and now is the time to retell them in the local context. In this sense, I would say, our world has become smaller.

And lastly, there is no universal way how to preach. We may be sure as to the object of preaching, namely the gospel. It is not necessary to compromise its principles to be able to communicate effectively in a postmodern context. It is necessary to really know the listeners, how they have been shaped as individuals, how they have been shaped as a community, and be especially aware of and alive to the specific challenges that people face, and respond to them with understanding and sympathy.

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