

Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture

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By

K. A. Beville

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Chapter One.....	1
The Shift from Contextualization to Syncretism in the Western Christian Church	
Chapter Two	19
Understanding Postmodernism: Issues Pertaining to the Feasibility of the Homiletic Task in the Contemporary Epistemological Context	
Chapter Three	53
Developing an Approach to Preaching which is Cognizant of Postmodern Culture	
Chapter Four	75
Inductive and Deductive Modes of Preaching	
Conclusion.....	119
Selected Bibliography	129
Notes.....	137
Index	163

PREFACE

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Michael Haykin, (Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, U.S.A.) for endorsing this work. Gratitude is also expressed here to Rev. Dr. Geoff Pound (Director of Theologians without Borders) for his commendation and helpful advice. These busy men gave of their time generously and graciously and their contribution to promoting this work of research is hereby acknowledged.

I also thank Carol Koulikourdi who liaised with me on behalf of Dr. Andy Nercessian to take me through the particulars of the publishing process for Cambridge Scholar's Publishing. I also wish to express my sincere thanks to Amanda Millar for her professional and patient help in preparing the manuscript in accordance with the required formatting criteria.

Some of the material in *Chapter One: The Shift from Contextualisation to Syncretism* reflects a personal perspective and is not as heavily referenced as the remainder of the work because it was previously published in a number of articles in journals which have a more general readership. Here is the publishing history of these articles: "From Congregations to Audiences" (*The Evangelical Magazine of Wales*, August 2002). "Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture" (*Foundations: The British Evangelical Council Journal of Theology*, November 2002). "Charming the Church" (*The Banner of Truth Magazine*, May, 2003). "Preaching that Persuades" (*Foundations: The British Evangelical Council Journal of Theology*, Spring 2008). The Conclusion includes material, under the sub-heading, "Vox-Pop and Vanishing Pulpits" that was previously published in *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, January 2003.

I refer to preachers as "men" and use the pronoun "he" throughout the work to refer to homiletics. Although I acknowledge that there are denominational and non-denominational churches that have women preachers I do not wish to comment, in this work, on whether or not they have a biblical mandate to do so. Some will argue that Scripture teaches that women are precluded from preaching. Others will contend that the Pauline prohibition to teach men in a church setting was merely a cultural bias and has no warrant in the contemporary context of western society. There are varied and nuanced positions which fall somewhere between

these two views. However, the matter is complex and controversial and as such has the potential to change the complexion of this work. In my judgement, therefore, it was better to exclude this issue from the scope of my research.

On a few occasions I refer to the “western church”. This merely reflects where my experience is rooted. My travels are making me increasingly conversant with the east and I do not mean to suggest that those outside the west are in any way excluded from this dialogue. Increasing globalisation means that both east and west will continue to influence each other, for bad or good.

This work engages with philosophical and practical theology in order to examine the feasibility of the homiletic task in postmodern culture. Understanding the historical and philosophical development of postmodernism is a necessary prerequisite to proposing an approach to preaching which is cognisant of postmodern sensitivities. I trust I have outlined the origin and evolution of the postmodern psyche with broad brushstrokes. The examination of the expository preaching model and the comparative analysis of deductive and inductive modes of communication suggest a way of moving beyond the apparent impasse. I trust that this will be a clear and useful work for preaching practitioners as well as those involved in training and inspiring those who wish to engage in the challenging task of preaching Christ in a postmodern culture.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SHIFT FROM CONTEXTUALIZATION TO SYNCRETISM IN THE WESTERN CHRISTIAN CHURCH

i) From congregations to audiences

The following story may help to illustrate the shift from contextualization to syncretism which is taking place in the Christian church in the west. Several years ago a fellow pastor told me that more and more frequently after the Sunday services people came to him and said, “that was good”. He had a troubled look on his face and it didn’t seem to fit with what he was saying.

“What’s your problem?” I probed.

“Well it’s nice to be appreciated and to receive some kind of affirmation but these recent comments are not like that” he said.

“If people are helped by the preaching that is surely a positive thing” I suggested.

“Of course” he agreed “but I have often asked, what has helped you?” and the replies indicate that they are not talking about being helped by anything I said but they seem to be commenting on the preaching as a performance!”

“You mean that they are evaluating your style?” I asked incredulously.

“That’s exactly right!” he said.

I sympathised with him and exhorted him to keep on preaching. But not long after that the same thing happened to me.

“That was great this morning!” a member of the congregation said with enthusiasm.

“In what way I inquired?”

“Very dramatic” he said confidently.

“How has it helped you?” I asked.

“I enjoyed the passionate delivery” he said.

“And has the message been of any help at all?” I questioned.

The gentleman in question seemed a little affronted and I sensed his embarrassment, it was an awkward moment.

“What you said was good too” he said with a little less enthusiasm. It was evident that he had been commenting only on the method and not the message.

These incidents led me to wonder if some Christian churches have developed a preference for style over content. In themselves they are merely subtle indicators of a more significant shift. Has preaching come to be seen as a public performance that may be evaluated by the same standards of media criticism as one might apply to a stand-up comedian? Is the preacher expected to entertain rather than enlighten? It grieves many who hold a high view of preaching who are mourning the passing of authority that preaching once possessed. The more I thought about it the more I began to see that many churches have unwittingly crossed the line between contextualization and syncretism.

To some extent the question as to where contextualization ends and syncretism begins is debatable. It depends primarily on the emphasis given either to Scripture or cultural setting.¹ Where faithfulness to Scripture is stressed, contextualization is understood as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. D. A. Carson says that this model “assigns control to Scripture but cherishes the ‘contextualization’ rubric because it reminds us that the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context”.² But, when the cultural context assumes (or is given) priority then that is a different matter. Carson points out that this model “assigns control to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling grid to determine the meaning of Scripture.”³ In this latter situation the purpose is to find what God is already doing in the culture rather than to communicate God’s eternal message within the cultural context.

ii) Syncretism

Syncretism occurs when Christian leaders adapt, either consciously or unconsciously, to the prevailing worldviews of their culture. It is the reshaping of Christian beliefs, and practices through cultural accommodation so that they reflect those of the dominant culture. Thus syncretism is the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness and speaks with a voice which reflects its culture.⁴

According to Van Rhee, syncretism is birthed from a yearning to make the gospel appear relevant. The church attempts to make its message attractive to outsiders and as these adaptations become regularly assimilated they become an integral part of the church's life. When significant changes in worldview take place within culture, the church then struggles to separate the terrestrial from the celestial. The Christian community, swept along by the ebb and flow of cultural currents, begins to lose her moorings. So syncretism takes place when the church opts into the prevailing cultural assumptions of society.⁵

Under the rubric of modernism, the rationalism of Enlightenment thinking formed an interpretive grid. In any cultural environment the Christian community ought to beware of excessively accommodating itself to the philosophies and practices of the dominant cultures.

There has been a significant paradigm shift best summarised by the word *postmodernism*. Some church people are wondering if it will come into the church. The reality is that it is well embedded in the church and evident in significant shifts in ecclesiology. Many churches have gone beyond the process of contextualizing the gospel in Western culture (which is consumerist and therapeutic) and have married themselves to these core values of society. This kind of syncretism is evident in many ways, especially in the abandonment of traditional modes of communicating truth and a disdain for authority. Douglas Groothuis cautions, "While Christian witness must be savvy concerning the realities of the postmodern condition in order to make the historic Christian message understandable and pertinent to denizens of the contemporary world, this does not mean that we should become postmodernists in the process."⁶

The very architecture of many churches articulates a particular view of preaching. The pulpit is central and elevated because authoritative preaching is central to practice and held in high regard. Thus the furniture speaks eloquently of the theology. Stackhouse has pointed out that, "the public image of the church in general and of individual congregations is very much defined by physical plants. Christians throughout history, therefore, have wisely paid attention to structures that would convey a particular message to the community."⁷

The church is not a building. The church consists of the redeemed people of God and whereas its physical structure make a statement so do its social structures, its connections and interconnections (and indeed the lack of them) in the community.

There are many radical and unnerving developments in how church is practiced today. Much is being advocated as, "living out the gospel *within* its cultural context rather than perpetuating an institutional commitment

apart from its cultural context”.⁸ What is called the “attractional church of Chrisendom” is being systematically dismantled in favour of an “incarnational”, “missional” model. These buzz words are deceptive because Christians have always endeavoured, by God’s grace, to live incarnational lives and tried to keep mission central to the life of the church. Frost and Hirsch readily admit that such a “thoroughgoing recalibration of the church will not always be met with open arms by the prevailing church leadership.”⁹ This is not surprising as such structures have a history that has evolved over centuries and has served the purpose of the church well during that time. These structures have a theological basis and sacred purpose which were constructed not just in bricks and mortar but with blood, sweat and tears.

Those who want an ecclesiology that devalues and sidelines preaching seem to defend their position with slogans rather than Scripture. People seem to want sound bites rather than sermons. Therapeutic rather than theological messages are sought and self-esteem has been cultivated instead of self-examination in the light of Scripture. There is a shift from theological and expository preaching (which is seen as a tedious, moralising discourse) to therapeutic and empathetic epilogues.

Some congregations are like adolescents who are manifesting the symptoms of vacuity and aimlessness often associated with Attention Deficit Disorder. The word *religion* is seen as an old fashioned term that implies dogma and tradition. The term *spirituality* is more in vogue because it is vague, universal and amorphous and very much in keeping with the postmodern psyche. But the church needs preachers of sound doctrine. It is interesting to note that Scripture identifies all sorts of ungodliness and irreligious attitudes such as adultery, perversion, slave trading, lying and perjury as “contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:10).

Rather than a healthy appetite for what is nutritious there appears to be an insatiable hunger for the frivolous. Has the church become something akin to a fast-food cafeteria where non-nutritious helpings are served up to appease the appetite for fresh stimulation and instant gratification? Many churches are coming under the influence of marketing strategies where congregations are being treated like consumers. Research into their tastes and preferences determine the type of “service” provided. It is easy to observe and decry syncretism in an African or Asian context but harder for us in the West to identify and avoid syncretism in our own situation.

Education was once a means of instilling virtue, training character and upholding the values of citizenship. Now, however, it has capitulated to the individualism and relativism of postmodern culture where self-esteem

is the matrix that shapes children's psyches. Curricula have been debased by including misguided and experimental therapeutic programmes in place of the tried and tested, true and trusted.¹⁰ The Christian church seems to be undergoing a similar process.

In many churches today there is a tension between those who see themselves as the *avant-garde* and those who function as the rearguard. Many regard Christian churches as elitist institutions like dusty old museums that function as custodians of tradition. The following analogy may help to illustrate and examine a trend that has parallels in the church today.

Art galleries were once frequented to admire acclaimed works of great art exhibited for the purpose of education and aesthetic stimulation. Today, however, as a result of a desire to be more relevant and popular, by appealing to the masses, many of these galleries have become slaves to novelty. They have forsaken what they deemed to be elitist in the mistaken belief that the space created would allow for the development of greater artistic vitality in their exhibitions. What has actually filled that vacuum is installation "art" often less aesthetic than a municipal landfill site. Furthermore the whole process is driven by notions of success based on profit and numbers. Richard Appignanesi says, "The more experimentation successfully proceeds to diminish the aura and autonomy of art, the more the aura and autonomy become the exclusive properties of exhibitive power – the critical establishment, curators, art-dealers and their clients."¹¹

Similarly "progressive" lobbyists in churches advocate changes to appeal to the "un-churched" on the grounds that, such changes will be a catalyst for "growth".¹² Growth is usually narrowly defined as additional numbers of people attending, very few of whom will be new converts. Many of these churches simply attract those similarly disaffected from traditional churches and the haemorrhaging of the latter makes them seem even more anaemic and so the process continues. Because this situation reflects an inherent dissatisfaction with traditional orthopraxy, it is often disgruntled individuals that are striking this keynote for change. Church is too stuffy and elitist, they say, and if it changes, like the art galleries, it will have larger attendance and so on.

In 1997 I attended a summer school on expository and evangelistic preaching in Memphis, Tennessee. This was a very positive experience overall. However, while I was in the USA I had some memorable encounters with different forms of preaching. Surfing the TV channels I came upon "Wrestlers for Jesus". In this programme large, muscular, motor-mouthed men in leotards grappled with each other in a carefully

choreographed performance. At the end the victor stepped out of the ring and breathlessly proclaimed, in a voice hoarse from trying to be heard above the cacophonous din of the frenzied audience, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me". I wonder if the apologist for this kind of thing would say wrestling is popular and if we want to reach people this is how to do it. At the heart of this argument there is a line of reasoning that sounds strangely familiar.

The most memorable experience I had in the USA was when I visited an Afro-American Church in Tennessee. I was conspicuously Caucasian in the large congregation. It was an unusual service insofar as it was a "Pastor's Appreciation Evening". An electric band began to play. The choir sang and swayed and clapped their hands. They looked very smart in their blue gowns and golden robes. And the congregation danced in the isles or where they stood at their seats. Then there were a couple of soulful performances by Whitney Houston style soloists. An offering followed this where several large baskets (the kind I keep beside the fire to hold logs!) were distributed. People seemed to give generously. In addition to this some individual gift-wrapped gifts (one being a gentleman's suit), were offered. I was fascinated.

I waited for the preacher with eager expectation and eventually he did arrive. He quoted from Ephesians, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers." (4:11). After he quoted his text there was a drum roll and a clash of cymbals and this seemed to stimulate the congregation to murmur various responses. He spoke with a rhythm and cadence one might associate with the lyrical style of Martin Luther King; it was a kind of song.¹³ There was a drum roll and clash of cymbals after each sentence. The murmur grew louder and responses were exclaimed from every corner of the building. Here, insofar as I can recall, is what he said as he held up his hand.

My thumb is like the apostles because it touches all the other gifts. My index finger is like the prophets because it points to the problem with people. My longest finger is like the evangelists because it reaches further than the others do. My wedding finger is like the pastor because he is married to the church and my little finger is like the teacher because in this church we don't have a whole lot of that!

This, punctuated with drumming, was the entire sermon. He gathered momentum as he spoke and finished in a crescendo of applause. He spoke only for a few minutes and that included numerous drum rolls! I'm not saying all Afro-American churches are like this but that was my

experience. It was a form of entertainment where the *congregation* was more like an *audience*.

The thing that has endured most with me from that experience is the thought that although what he said was memorable it was meaningless. When I hear people saying that preaching should include aids to help people remember the message I think of that occasion. Style can be a distraction from the message or even a substitute in the absence of any real message at all. The advice of Paul to Timothy seems apt, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:13).

iii) Charming the church

Some churches have become engaged in experiments to accommodate themselves to the market-driven expectations of the world. The principle seems to be that if the church wants to get its share of the *audience* it must offer them something they want. The church can be popular if it is prepared to trivialise preaching and some think that is a price worth paying. When the congregation of a church is treated like an audience the activity of that church is a vaudeville act rather than a service. Some of these experimental projects have begun modestly with noble motivation but misguided enthusiasm. We now find that such churches have become caricatures; a distortion of what church is meant to be. The emergent church is a postmodern phenomenon that has crossed the boundary between contextualization and syncretism.

This process begins when a church desires to be more acceptable and pleasing to the community. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong in such a desire but that aspiration may become an unhealthy obsession leading to compromising changes. At first changes made by a church in its practice may seem benign. The church is being mesmerised by entertainment values.

Expository preaching is a form of spiritual discourse that dictates and regulates the content of the communication. The advocates of other forms of ecclesiology that minimise and displace preaching, fail to recognise the inadequacy of alternative methodologies to shape and safeguard the message. At first people are urged to make what may appear to be cosmetic changes and they soon discover that the content of the message is subordinate to its style of presentation. This is part of a dumbing-down process where optional means of transmitting the message are advocated. Paul’s instruction to the Roman church needs to be restated in today’s hedonistic society, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed

by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans12:2).

Preaching produces serious-minded and biblically informed people whereas in its absence there is shallowness. Preaching is seen, in some circles, as no more than a cultural bias. But in an age of epistemological relativism preaching as a means of prophetic proclamation has a healthy influence on churches where it is central to its life.¹⁴

There has been an epistemological shift that is reflected in eclectic approaches to communicating truth. However, authoritative preaching makes demands on its hearers and one is never left merely impressed with the eloquence of the preacher. A sermon is more than semantics. The hearer is made aware of the clear implications of the message. Ultimately it is not the sensuous experience of the preaching or the superior logic of the argument but the power of the Holy Spirit that is at work. It is a cognitive communication and an emotional experience but primarily it is a spiritual awakening and quickening of the soul. In other words, preaching is not just rhetoric it has a spiritual resonance that vibrates in the soul. It trains believers to tutor their minds and integrate experience in a process that shapes identity by defining and regulating understanding of the truth in accordance with biblical patterns. But it requires in the hearer a residual faith in the authenticity and authority of the message as well as the medium of communication.

I grew up in Limerick City, in Ireland, where the river Shannon was a dominant feature of the geographical landscape as well as the recreational and occupational life of the people. In my lifetime that great waterway has been slowly polluted and it is no longer suitable for bathing. It is amazing what can be lost in a generation.

The church is like a river insofar as changes in its life are sometimes gradual and imperceptible at first. Like the river it can be slowly polluted. It takes time before the river becomes so poisonous that the fish die. Yet the river looks the same as before and one could still take a boat ride on it. In other words even when life has been taken from it the river does not disappear, nor do all of its uses but its value has been diminished and its degraded condition will have harmful effects throughout the landscape.

Boating is now a leisure activity on the Shannon but in a previous generation life was sustained by the fish caught in that great waterway. The river is still there but it's not what it used to be and it is not what it appears to be! So it is with the church that is being slowly polluted. If a church merely has a recreational function in the life of the community it has ceased to be what it ought to be.

In some churches an ephemeral and experiential enterprise masquerading as preaching has replaced the traditional sermon. The transcendent has been displaced by the trivial.

Preaching is not meant to be inert. It is not merely about imparting information. There has to be an information-action ratio where relevant information is generated into action, otherwise the information is no more than an abundance of irrelevant facts, although in any communication environment input will always exceed output. In other words what one is informed about will always exceed the possibility of action based on that information. The question is; what exactly should that ratio be?

Detractors of preaching will say that the congregations are faced with the problem of an information glut, which is another way of saying that there is diminished spiritual potency. They might suggest that the Sunday evening sermons dislodge the Sunday morning sermons from the minds of hearers. Surely, if this is true it is not less information that is needed but more action.

Some might say that preaching gives answers to questions not asked in postmodern culture. This criticism does not take account of the fact that preaching is dialogical and helps hearers ask the right questions.

It no longer seems strange now to have church events where there is no preaching, take, for example what is sometimes called “low-key evangelism”. Various activities can be arranged in the church building with the purpose in mind to “just get people across the threshold” and into a “non-threatening environment”. This has come to seem natural rather than bizarre. The fact that many have lost the sense that this is strange is an indication of their desire to be inoffensive. The desire to be accepted and the need to appear relevant may turn the church in a wrong direction. Remember the words of Paul, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Is preaching disappearing? It has certainly moved to the periphery and other things are beginning to take its place at the centre. The demise of preaching is part of a wider issue, namely, the crisis of confidence in biblical wisdom, its authority, sufficiency and efficacy. The writer to the Hebrews should put our view of God’s Word in perspective, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12).

Many churches are reaching the point where methodology is displacing theology as the area of competence over which a pastor must have expert control? Paul told the church in Rome that “faith comes from hearing, and

hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10: 17). There is a message that must be told in a method ordained by God for that purpose. Paul’s instruction to Timothy applies to today and has not been rescinded, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season.” (2 Timothy 4:2).

iv) Developing a new approach to preaching

We live in a postmodern society where the very concept of objective, absolute truth is perceived not just as antiquated but absurd. Epistemological and ethical fragmentation has led to moral relativism. The search for an apologetic strategy in postmodern society is a formidable challenge for the Christian church. Is it possible to find a biblically informed and effective contemporary approach? Is the apologetic task feasible in a culture that denies the existence of objective, universal truth? The biblical instruction is clear, ‘always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect’ (1 Peter 3:15).

Under the auspices of modernity colonialism and capitalism flourished and in the twentieth- century, Nazism gained a stranglehold on Europe and Marxist social experiments quarantined millions from what it perceived as the evils of free market economics.¹⁵ Modernity failed to create the utopia to which it aspired and these ideologies came to be seen as oppressive metanarratives. Christianity has also come to be viewed in this way.

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

Under the modernist rubric preaching was a linear mode of discourse, which was generally coherent, sequential and essentially logical. The expository sermon, therefore, used arguments, hypotheses, reasons and refutations as traditional instruments of rational discourse. As such it cultivated 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. But the postmodern mind works differently and a new approach is needed.

Modernist preaching was essentially an intelligent activity that assumed cognitive skills amongst hearers. The modernist sermon had a particular line of thought where judgements and application were made in a coherent and orderly argument. It is not that it was essentially intellectual but that it was inherently rational. In other words it assumed that reason would be employed to enlighten. Even though people could be moved emotionally by preaching they were required firstly to understand its content and accept its conclusions.

Preaching was, after all, expositing a text that has syntactical structure and content that can be explicated. There was, therefore, not just a faith in the truth of the text but a concomitant and coterminous faith in reason itself. Thus preaching engaged the intellect. It assumed that people are rational and analytical creatures. Preaching in the Enlightenment period focused on conveying biblical information and making claims in propositional form.

Thus preaching constructed a context in which the question: “is this true or false?” was relevant and meaningful. Whether it was sophisticated or simple it appealed to cognitive powers based on understanding and reason. It had a bias towards the ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially and because it was based on reason and order it had an inherent aversion for contradiction. It was never about merely knowing facts, even biblical facts. It involved 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 mind has a predisposed antipathy to preaching because it understands it to be authoritarian, absolutist and oppressive. Logic, reason, sequential thought and rules of contradiction are abandoned. In aesthetics this is evident in Dadaism, the 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 a motif in curtain or wallpaper patterns 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 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 either the message or methodology be adapted to accommodate postmoderns? How can an apologetic strategy be shaped 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 in relation to preaching?

Individualism and relativism are features of our postmodern 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 there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25). If individualism and relativism are features of contemporary culture then there is a great need for the church to counter this by being incarnational and transforming communities. In a society where rational discourse has failed Christians ought to manifest the reality of the power of God in radically altered lives through intentional missional activity.

Nevertheless there is a danger that, in attempting to shape an effective apologetic strategy in a postmodern society, pragmatism will gain the ascendancy and secularise the church. It may be timely to take heed to the warning of Paul to the Galatian Church, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8).

Increasingly churches are being influenced by postmodernity. Some 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 practice and this affects preaching. This is evident in a shift of emphasis from truth to technique where psychology tends to eclipse Christology.

The church must not capitulate to postmodernism but it has a duty to engage with it for the sake of the gospel. Thus it needs 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. Contemporary culture is individualistic and hedonistic and this is reflected in elements of the church which are pleasure-seeking, experiential-focused and Christian-centred rather than communal, sacrificial and Christ-centred.

There is an obligation to continue to engage in proclamation and not merely silently model Christlikeness through mission activity which is non-proclamatory and engages in development work. That would be a contradiction because Christ engaged in proclamation. It should not be a case of either one or the other but rather both together. The Word of God should not be dismissed as irrelevant in a postmodern society because Scripture says that God’s Word will never be void of power:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11).

It is important that Christians are informed about the mindset of people today. It is interesting to note that in the list of people who came to join the Old Testament King David in battle at a crucial juncture in the history of Israel there were, “men who had understanding of the times.” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Such people (men and women) are needed today at an equally crucial juncture in the history of God’s people.

In a conversation between Jesus and the Roman Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, Jesus said, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world-to bear witness to the truth.” (John 18:37). Then Pilate asked, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). The Enlightenment project was, ostensibly at least, a search for truth but that is now deemed to be a failed project. In the postmodern context nobody is asking; “what is truth?” because the search for absolute truth has been abandoned. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). Peter proclaimed; “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). These words are as politically incorrect now as they were in the first century when they

were uttered. They may engender the same kind of hostility in today's postmodern world as they did then. In seeking to find an apologetic strategy that is contemporary the church must be unapologetic about preaching Christ.

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, whether that is understood as exclusion from the eschatological kingdom or eternal conscious torment in hell for those who do not repent is a moot point. But it is a reckoning based on "truth". Scripture says, "the judgment of God is according to truth." (Romans 2:2 NKJV). In spite of postmodern assertions to the contrary there is an ultimate standard, or to put it another way, there is absolute truth.

The glory of the gospel is that it offers salvation to all that trust in the work of Christ. But to the postmodern mind preaching may be merely discredited rhetoric and the challenge is to find a way of preaching that connects with postmoderns.

How Christians live in contemporary culture is crucial. The Old Testament character Daniel, for example, found himself to be an alien, a displaced person, in Babylon. But 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. Scripture says, "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself." (Daniel 1:8). Believers, too, must make a conscious decision not to allow the prevailing culture to swallow them.

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 interesting to see how Jesus replied: "And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.'" (Luke 7:22). John doubted the deity of Jesus and doubted all that he had preached in heralding the Christ. Jesus does not answer him merely with words of reassurance. He does not give a theological dissertation on the fulfilment of prophecy in the person and work of Christ. Rather, 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 the church must be messengers from the Saviour who talk as first hand

witnesses of the transforming power of Christ so that they may say with John the apostle:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life...we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-4).

This is important in a postmodern 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.

Many people in postmodern society are deaf, blind, dumb and diseased with sin ("sin", of course, is a politically incorrect word). But postmodern society, in spiritual terms, is lame and lost. The church has a transforming vision to transmit but if it just talks about how things could be it is falling short. For example, Christians cannot just talk about love but must live it. When reason and rational argument fail (as they do in postmodern culture) relationship may fill the vacuum.

Some sections of the Christian church could do more to show the relevance of faith to society. Some have narrowly defined "mission" as evangelism and rejected what it sees as the "social gospel" because it understands mission as, a more purely "spiritual" activity. The polemical debate has polarised the Christian community. Many people today are interested in environmental issues. The Christian can show that the ultimate ecological ethic is rooted in the creator. The church is failing society by leaving issues such as these in the hands of new age, secular activists.

The concept of *missio Dei* (mission of God) needs to be universally adapted by all sections of the Christian church. The term refers to the Christian theological understanding of mission where missionary theory and practice is founded in the missionary activity of the Triune God.¹⁶ David Bosch states it thus, "The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world."¹⁷ So this serves as the *raison d'être* and impetus for mission. It continues to function as a corrective to the notion of mission as merely "evangelism" and gives a unifying theological theme to mission activity. It has been well said by Pachau, "It is not the church that has a mission, it is God's mission that has a church."¹⁸

It is perfectly reasonable to examine different ways of communicating (other than preaching) with contemporary culture. However, the church must be careful not to yield to the temptation to market itself to “unchurched” consumers by appealing to their emotions and forsaking the duty to teach people to think biblically. The first strand in an apologetic strategy will be to preach the Word of God. The second will be community relationships. Christians are messengers, with a message but they are also models. One of the aims of preaching to congregations is to enable people to model the message.

Starting with some observations relating to shifts in ecclesiology and identifying them as a move beyond contextualization to syncretism the subsequent chapters in this discussion go on to assess the feasibility of preaching in a postmodern culture which rejects both the idea of absolute truth and authority used as power. The broad contours of the historical and philosophical development of postmodernism will be traced. In the contemporary epistemological context the Enlightenment project is generally deemed to have failed and Christianity is perceived by many as an oppressive metanarrative. The rational experiment which spanned the period 1789 to 1989 has not succeeded in leading to the paradise it promised. In a world that is becoming increasingly sceptical and cynical and where preaching practitioners are becoming more and more disillusioned, the search for insight and guidelines about preaching to postmoderns becomes imperative. In a relational age, the old supremacy of rationality is impotent and it is important to distinguish between *authoritarian* and *authoritative* preaching; the latter allowing hope for the survival of the homiletic task. Humility is preferable to certitude and persuasion must be redefined to include *logos* (the inherent logic of the message itself), *ethos* (the integrity of the speaker) and *pathos* (the emotions evoked by the oration).

What is needed is an approach to preaching which is cognizant of postmodern culture. This may be achieved by evaluating the merits and demerits of deductive and inductive modes of communication where the preacher is understood as one who facilitates a dynamic encounter with the living God. An inductive approach to expository preaching, along with employing narrative, seems to be the most powerful and effective means of engaging the minds, emotions and wills of postmodern listeners. This approach signposts a way forward in the labyrinthine complexity of the new paradigm and demonstrates that the homiletic task is still feasible in a new epistemological, ontological and ethical context.

Certain *a priori* assumptions govern assessment of the various theological attempts to reconstruct and communicate ideas of truth and

revelation in the light of the postmodern challenge. Consequently, all theologies that contravene these *a priori* assumptions (by showing themselves to be, self-contradictory, self-enclosed, self-referential and without ethical significance) are rejected. These assumptions are grounded ultimately in the belief that God, by his very nature, never contradicts himself and that he is concerned about ethical matters. I suggest that these assumptions are reasonable. These criteria have informed the discussion on three levels, determined by the nature of the postmodern challenge. Postmodernism challenges all theologies of truth and revelation, in the area of epistemology, ontology and morality.

With regard to the ontological challenge ideas of revelation and truth have to take into account the fact that the method of deconstruction has fundamentally altered classical world-views. This alteration is twofold. Firstly, with regard to language there is the deconstruction of the referential nature of language. Secondly, there is the deconstruction of the Cartesian *cogito*.

Theologies of truth and revelation must neither be conceived to be dominating and oppressive nor completely frivolous and unperturbed by ethical questions. Relativity may never be sought to be overcome by demands for unconditional obedience, based on so-called indubitable divine revelation, formulated in fixed and timeless propositions. Neither may relativity lapse into a complete relativism which rests in the radical incommensurability of different discourses. This position relinquishes the quest to bring about a more ethical and harmonious society.

CHAPTER TWO

UNDERSTANDING POSTMODERNISM: ISSUES PERTAINING TO THE FEASIBILITY OF THE HOMILETIC TASK IN THE CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Much has been written in recent decades describing the phenomenon of postmodernism. What is postmodernism? What are its essential features? For example, Walter Truett Anderson in his book, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be*, says that the world has been radically altered, "In recent decades we have passed, like Alice slipping through the looking glass, into a New World."¹

He suggests that this altered state of consciousness is the New World of postmodernism.

There is no consensus view of what postmodernism is, although key features of this phenomenon may be identified. Postmodernism defines itself according to what it is not: modern. But in what sense is it "post"? Any or all of the meanings: *result*, *aftermath*, *afterbirth*, *development*, *denial*, or *rejection* of modernism presents a case. Perhaps it is some combination of these meanings.²

It is not clear exactly what it is, because it resists and obscures the sense of modernism. Its name suggests, in a literal sense, that it is a new age which has surpassed the age of modernism. Any age is identified and defined by evidence of historic changes in the way people see, think and produce. Such changes relate primarily to art, theory and economic history. It is obvious that changes have taken place in these spheres.

The word postmodern is part of the academic parlance of today. It is part of the vocabulary of literary criticism and more general communication.³ However it is not at all clear precisely what the term means. Daniel J. Adams says that there are, "Few terms as commonly used, and just as commonly misunderstood as postmodernism."⁴ For some, such as Lawrence Cahoon, postmodernism represents "the defeat of

modern European theology, metaphysics, authoritarianism, colonialism, racism, and domination.”⁵ For others, postmodernism is a radical intellectual movement intent on subverting civilisation.⁶ Postmodernism has even been described as “a goofy collection of hermetically obscure writers who are really talking about nothing at all.”⁷

Charles Colson is a writer who represents a particular strand of opinion that offers a bleak picture of postmodernism. He claims:

Today, all the major ideological constructions are being tossed on the ash heap of history. All that remains is the cynicism of postmodernism, with its false assertions that there is no objective truth or meaning, that we are free to create our own truth as long as we understand that it’s nothing more than an illusion.⁸

Is this an accurate portrayal of postmodernism? Alister McGrath is correct in his statement that “a full definition of postmodernism is virtually impossible.”⁹ Cahoon suggests that it is a “mistake to seek a single essential meaning” of postmodernism that is “applicable to all the term’s instances.”¹⁰

Postmodernism is a problematic concept to clarify primarily because the concepts associated with it are complex. It is not a monolithic ideology. For example, there are several postmodern perspectives in art (including film and music), architecture and so on.¹¹ David Ray Griffin indicates that there are various postmodern theologies.¹² The term postmodernism also pertains to some of the principal cultural and intellectual movements such as feminism, pragmatism, existentialism, deconstruction, and post-empiricist philosophy of science.¹³ Postmodernism is not easy to define: it is like looking at the negative of a film and trying to see the image represented. It is associated more with what it rejects than with what it positively affirms.¹⁴ For Adams, postmodernism is a concept “that has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what is, but only in terms of what it has just-now-ceased to be.”¹⁵

In addition, the attempt to clarify the concept of postmodernism is further complicated by lack of consensus amongst authors about how it ought to be defined.¹⁶ Postmodernism has been classified in manifold ways: as an era, a condition, a state of mind or attitude, and a philosophical movement.¹⁷ As Griffin points out, postmodernism “is used in a confusing variety of ways, some of them contradictory to others.”¹⁸ Furthermore, efforts to define postmodernism are considered by some of its adherents as an inimical desire to pigeonhole a concept that is inherently amorphous.¹⁹ It is not always easy to clarify where modernism

ends and postmodernism begins.²⁰ There is even no agreement about when postmodernism began or when the term was first used.

Cahoone credits Rudolf Pannwitz as the first to use the designation in 1917. Pannwitz's usage delineates the nihilism of modern man as outlined by Friedrich Nietzsche.²¹ Others credit Frederico de Oniz with initiating the term *postmodernismo* in 1934. Carl F. H. Henry says that John Cobb first coined the word, as it is currently understood, in 1964.²² However, it must be said that postmodernism is generally understood to be a philosophical word that refers to a movement that started in France in the 1960s and continued to be cultivated in the United States.²³

Notwithstanding the difficulties of defining postmodernism, some working definition is necessary. It can be said with certainty that postmodernism refers to the period "after the modern world."²⁴ McGrath says it is the "general intellectual outlook arising after the collapse of modernism."²⁵ It is a reaction to the modernism of Western civilisation.²⁶ It is a counter-culture worldview that is inherently antithetical to the Enlightenment's confidence in universal rational principles.²⁷ As postmodern doctrine is generally taken to be true in Western culture, it is apt to refer to the present time as the postmodern era.²⁸ Ronald J. Allen says that:

While postmodernism is an extremely diverse phenomenon, people who identify themselves as postmodern typically eschew understandings of the world that are universal (totalizing), assert relativity in every form of awareness, seek to expose and critique privilege, and celebrate particularity, diversity and pluralism in all life forms.²⁹

Postmodernism is an influential worldview. "Postmodernism is a new set of assumptions about reality", Dockery asserts.³⁰ "It impacts our literature, our dress, our art, our architecture, our music, our sense of right and wrong, our self-identity, and our theology."³¹

As postmodernism is a reaction to modernism, a basic knowledge of modernism and pre-modernism is helpful for acquiring an understanding of postmodernism. As Millard J. Erickson states, "If we would understand postmodernism, then, we must first understand the two periods that preceded it, namely, the pre-modern and the modern."³²

i) Pre-modernism as precursor and progenitor of modernism

Postmodernism's more remote predecessor, the pre-modern period, is generally thought to refer to the pre-Enlightenment era incorporating the

ancient and medieval periods.³³ What are the essential features of this epoch? Erickson says the pre-modern world was characterised by “belief in the rationality of the universe.”³⁴ In the pre-modern period, reality was understood as an organic, organised and inter-related entity. Furthermore it was perceived as dualistic.

Not only was there the immediately identifiable natural world but there was also the less obvious, though nonetheless real, supernatural domain. If God created and sustained the universe then everything had a pattern and a purpose. This dualistic rationality and spiritual order therefore permitted humanity a privileged place in the hierarchical structure. Stanley J. Grenz notes, “God stood at the apex, followed by the angelic hosts; humans found their place ‘a little lower than the heavenly beings’ (Psalm 8:5) but above the rest of the created order.”³⁵

Phenomena in the pre-modern world were perceived and explained by the purpose they served in teleological terms.³⁶ In theological terms, that is the doctrine of design and purpose in the material world. In other words, the pre-modern mind thought of the world as a reality designed by God for a particular purpose. This is particularly true in the Western world, where the great architect of the universe was thought to be the sovereign God superintending the affairs of history to the ultimate fulfilment of his will. This, incidentally, is by no means a discarded way of thinking in the church today. Indeed many adherents of the three major monotheistic Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) share this way of thinking. History was seen as a linear process moving inexorably toward an ultimate climax. Henry notes that the pre-modern age “held that nature and history reflect God’s immutable ordering of the cosmos. Its worldview elaborated a distinctive understanding of the nature and destiny of the human self in a meaningful and purposive universe created and ruled by God.”³⁷ Another essential feature of the pre-modern period was a fundamental realism that believed in the objective existence of the world.³⁸ The world was seen as actually existing in a manner external to the mind or independently from anyone’s perception of it.

The pre-modern period held to a correspondence theory of truth. Assertions were thereby deemed to be true if they accurately stated the characteristics of the real nature of what they sought to describe. The converse was also held to be true, and so statements that did not accurately describe reality were understood to be false.³⁹ Ronald J. Allen says that, “The modern preacher attempted to offer an understanding of Christian faith that was consistent with Enlightenment presuppositions concerning truth.”⁴⁰