

## Apostolic Preaching in a Postmodern Context: A Plea for the Death of the Expository Sermon.

William Wade, April 2012

1 Cor. 2:1-2; 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' (ESV)

When the Manic Street Preachers labelled their 1998 album 'This is My Truth Tell Me Yours', it was more than just a marketing gimmick. It was capturing the mood of an emerging generation. The age and context we find ourselves in is presently immersed in postmodern philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Moving beyond F. Lyotard's initial description of postmodernism as containing a basic 'incredulity towards metanarratives'<sup>2</sup>, postmodernism has developed and infiltrated the Western worldview and replaced rational, scientific reason with subjective relativism, the questioning of objectivity and the doubting of morality.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the Church in general tended to respond to the onset of postmodern philosophy by galvanising the modern mindset, elevating apologetic argument and strengthening the force of the expository sermon. However, it seems that with generally falling numbers within the evangelical Western Church, this modernistic approach is being largely ignored in the debate of relevance, and now the question of evangelical significance is being highlighted, particularly in the realm of communication, and specifically, the importance of preaching.

H. W. Robinson argues that expository preaching is the 'most relevant message we can offer to our hearers.'<sup>4</sup> But is this statement actually true? In other words, is this a viable and biblical approach to the current postmodern challenge?

Within postmodern philosophy, possible loopholes for the creative evangelical to exploit can be found. For instance, postmodernism has a 'deep distrust of metanarratives'<sup>5</sup>, but it does have a willingness to embrace the power of *story* (albeit 'little' stories as opposed to 'grand' story<sup>6</sup>). Twinned with the philosophy that *experience* is exalted over the idea of 'truth' or even 'fact'<sup>7</sup>, the consequent loophole

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<sup>1</sup> D. S. Dockery. "The Challenge of Postmodernism" in Dockery, D. S. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> F. Lyotard, as quoted by E. T. H. Brann. "What is Postmodernism?" in *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1992). <http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hrp/issues/1992/Brann.pdf> (10-04-2011).

<sup>3</sup> C. F. H. Henry. "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in Dockery, D. S. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> H. W. Robinson. "The Relevance of Expository Preaching" in Gibson, S. M. (Ed.) *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> J. Finney. *Recovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> M. Moynagh. *Changing World Changing Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch Books, 2001, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson. *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, p. 95.

within its philosophy can be exploited by the evangelical use of *testimony*, which is comprised not only of theology, but predominantly of *experience* and *story*.

Again, postmodernism is reluctant to acknowledge, and therefore pursue, any form of what may be considered 'truth'.<sup>8</sup> It does, however, celebrate the use of dialogue and conversation, aiming at 'continuing a conversation rather than at discovering truth.'<sup>9</sup> With the advent of the Alpha Course, Christianity Explored and other similar evangelistic initiatives, evangelicalism has responded well to the postmodern challenge, via the form of conversational Christianity. A significant question does arise from this phenomenon though, revolving around this issue – where does *preaching* fit into this model of communication?

Perhaps a final chink in the postmodern philosophy is in its embracing of 'image' over 'word'. In the U.S., 1985 was the first year in which more videos were hired out of public libraries than books.<sup>10</sup> The blatant cultural statement being made was that visual story is more important than written story. Of course, the modern evangelical mindset of the strengthening of the expository sermon found itself in real difficulty with this transition, and many evangelical quarters have sought and fought to maintain 'the Christian faith in its modern form'<sup>11</sup>, while others are carefully endeavouring to 'interface historic Christian truths into the dawning of a new era.'<sup>12</sup> The Bible is rich in imagery, with the power of symbol, the wonder of creation, the redemptive story, the missionary journeys, the prophetic signs, the use of typology and apocalyptic language. There is room within biblical theology for hermeneutic licence in embracing the postmodern desire to be image-fed, while still clinging to the evangelical ethos. The issue is one of courage and creativity, rather than hermeneutical compromise.

In spite of these present challenges and opportunities, the call for allegiance to the expository sermon is still being heard across evangelicalism. When M. Lloyd-Jones stated in *Preaching and Preachers* forty years ago, 'I therefore lay down this proposition that a sermon should always be expository'<sup>13</sup>, he could possibly not have guessed that his echo would carry on into the twenty-first century, even though the challenges of a twenty-first century postmodern philosophy are radically different than the challenges of a twentieth-century modernist philosophy, as it was in Lloyd-Jones' day. And so in 1986, J. Horner argues that the expository sermon is Bible-

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<sup>8</sup> J. Thwaites. *The Church Beyond the Congregation*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> S. J. Grenz. "Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology" in Dockery, D. S. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Arthurs. "The Postmodern Mind and Preaching" in Gibson, S. M. (Ed.) *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, p. 179.

<sup>11</sup> R. E. Webber. *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones. *Preaching and Preachers*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971, p. 72.

based preaching<sup>14</sup>, in 1992, D. Prime advocates that expository preaching is the key to a successful ministry<sup>15</sup> and in 2004, H. W. Robinson is championing the cause, affirming in his view that expository preaching is biblical preaching.<sup>16</sup> The expository sermon is certainly still held in high esteem. However, two serious questions must be asked of this mode of communication – 1: What does the expository sermon look like? And 2: Is it biblical?

G. Batson summarises the generic expository sermon outline as including an introduction, transitional sentence leading to the main body, which contains three to four possible alliterated main points (each containing three or four sub-points), another transitional sentence leading to the conclusion and a powerful last sentence.<sup>17</sup> There will of course be variations on this generic model, but Batson captures the basic outline of what has become the expository sermon.

The real question to be answered though is this – is this form of communication biblical, let alone relevant? The answer is arguably a resounding ‘No!’ In the New Testament, it is impossible to fit any sermon, speech or address into even the most vague outline which may be considered akin to the outline of the expository sermon. M. C. Tenney argues that apostolic preaching was, ‘Unlike modern preaching, which is usually either the logical development of some topic or the elaboration of a single text’<sup>18</sup>, suggesting, ‘...the apostolic preaching was a narration of the life and work of Jesus, with a defence of his resurrection, and was followed by a call to repentance and faith in his name.’<sup>19</sup> Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Peter’s speech on the Day of Pentecost, Paul’s address at the Areopagus – none were anywhere near to what could be termed expository sermons. In particular, both Peter and Paul had at least three common threads in their preaching – 1: Their preaching was declarative, even confrontational, in nature, as opposed to modern preaching which is often apologetic. 2: Their preaching sought to reveal the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ in the context of the salvific message. 3: Their preaching carried an expectation of repentance and faith towards God. In both preachers, the issue of power and response seemed to hold a greater measure of importance than form. A. D. Palma concludes that, ‘Peter’s address was more than a sermon. It was a Spirit-inspired utterance that was comparable to prophetic messages often delivered by God’s servants in Old Testament times as they were moved on by the Holy Spirit.’<sup>20</sup> Both Tenney and Palma carry the suggestion of an inspired and inspiring preaching

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<sup>14</sup> J. Horner. “Preaching” in Belben, H. (Ed.) *Ministry in the Local Church*. London: The Epworth Press, 1986, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> D. Prime. “The Church and the Ministry” in Grogan, G. (Ed.) *Shaping Tomorrow Starting Today*. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 1992, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> H. W. Robinson. “The Relevance of Expository Preaching” in Gibson, S. M. (Ed.) *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> See G. Batson. *Expository Preaching*. Springfield, MO: Global University, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> M. C. Tenney. *New Testament Survey*. Leicester: Inter varsity Press, 2003, p. 240.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240-241.

<sup>20</sup> A. D. Palma. “Spirit-Inspired Utterance” in *Enrichment Journal* (\_\_\_\_).

[http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Tools\\_of\\_the\\_Trade/index\\_CAM.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Tools_of_the_Trade/index_CAM.cfm) (10-18-2011).

ministry, as opposed to what could be labelled the professional and predictable preaching methods esteemed by many within evangelicalism today.

The need for a contemporary response in light of the redundancy of the expository sermon is glaringly obvious. But where do we go from here? The answer is in the past and in the present – the return to true apostolic preaching, within the communicative framework of postmodernism. In short, *postmodern apostolic preaching*. In other words, taking the ruthless, yet necessary, step of disregarding expository sermon ‘outlines’ and redeveloping the spiritual discipline of actually being led by the Holy Spirit, both in preparation and in practice, concerning the delivery of God’s Word. This is a fundamental necessity in reclaiming the power of the apostolic message of the cross. However, by interweaving the power of testimony, the possibility of post-preaching dialogue and discussion<sup>21</sup> and allowing for the presentation of image (possibly via power-point, media, drama or vivid, imaginative story-telling), the apostolic preaching found in the first century can be revived to a contemporary postmodern audience.

If the expository sermon continues to be exalted, then the clear suggestion is that we as a Church have become more sophisticated, presentable and professional than Peter or Paul ever were, which of course, may very well be true. But the heart-searching question remains the same – are we really more powerful?

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<sup>21</sup> For a local church example of this practice, see [www.adullamdenver.com](http://www.adullamdenver.com).

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