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THE INITIATIVE TO ENGAGE LISTENERS FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL
PERSUASIVELY IN POSTMODERN AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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SEPTEMBER 2011

ABSTRACT

The Initiative to Engage Listeners for Preaching the Gospel Persuasively in Postmodern American Evangelicalism
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2011

This dissertation will argue that in order for evangelistic preaching within American evangelicalism to regain the effectiveness currently being lost in the dramatically shifting culture it will be necessary for preachers to exert greater initiative to engage listeners with emotional persuasion beyond merely the information presented.

Changes in American culture at the twenty-first century mark reflect a transition from the modern to the postmodern era. One affect this change is having upon the religious life of American evangelicalism is a waning effectiveness of preaching the gospel as indicated by declining numbers of conversion growth in churches. The current crisis arises from modes of communication long-entrenched in modern assumptions while the culture itself is shifting to the postmodern era. Emerging characteristics of the postmodern era indicate that for effective communication the need to establish an affective connection is more important than the informational content itself. Communicating the gospel will require a heightened focus on engaging listeners so the message may gain a hearing at all, much less an effective response.

Consideration will begin by examining the historical contrasts that produced an Information Age. During this era the rise of academic seminary training fostered styles of preaching predominately based in cognitive information. Evangelism adapted to the culture with presentation designed to convince listeners using logical argument arranged in propositional outlines. This approach resulted in eventual marginalization of the Christian voice in the mainstream culture. Further consideration will evaluate biblical and theological attributes of preaching to differentiate evangelistic preaching from other forms of instruction, and to distinguish timeless aspects of the gospel from those reflecting the cultural contextualization of a particular era. Consideration will also examine communication theory especially related to persuasion. While the mysterious element of God's work is always paramount, the human task of evangelistic preaching must embrace persuasion dynamics, particularly in response to changing culture, to gain effectiveness. The initiative toward engaging listeners is valid both for theological interpretation and applied practice.

The purpose of this paper is to summon American preachers to affectively engage listeners, rather than merely propagate information. As a more engaging approach is embraced, the gospel may more effectively accomplish its intended purpose of transforming lives and societal structures.

Content Reader: Daniel Harrell, PhD

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INTRODUCTION

Evangelism in America is facing a problem. In some ways, it is not a new

problem; there is evidence of it in the earliest records of the New Testament. In other

ways, the current version of the problem raises challenges that are unlike any ever faced

before. It is a problem of engagement—how to captivate, much less persuade, an

audience that seems uninterested. The current problem has been over five hundred years

in the making, but carries the unique contextualization specific to the modern era and the

entrenched assumptions it imposes upon evangelistic preaching.

The Christian church in the Western world is currently in a state of steep

numerical decline,[1] and evangelistic preaching in particular is suffering a waning

effectiveness at producing identifiable conversions to Christ. While the effectiveness of

the gospel always rests in the mystery of God's work, it is in cooperation with the human

responsibility of evangelistic preaching that progress is made. Between the timeless and

universal impact of the gospel and the particular contexts of culture it addresses,

evangelistic preaching has always remained the avenue by which the gospel is advanced.

The specific scope of this consideration is evangelistic preaching among the

churches within American Evangelicalism. Many of the issues addressed readily pertain

to other religious groups and contexts, however, the focus remains with a particular

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[1] Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003), 2-5. Also, see pp. 22-23 of this dissertation.

segment of the Protestant church in America. While Evangelicalism historically traces back as far as the seventeenth century, in more recent times the term has come to refer to religious groups that embody a middle ground between theological liberalism, prevalent among Mainline denominations, and fundamentalism, prevalent among Pentecostal movements. This understanding is problematic though because some Mainline churches, pastors, and people are of evangelical character even though their denomination represents liberalism. Likewise, some Pentecostal churches, pastors, and people are of evangelical character even though their denomination is fundamentalist. Brian McLaren addresses the distinction between the label of Evangelical and the character of evangelical,

> More positively, *Evangelical* generally refers to people who (a) highly respect the Bible (so that for them, *biblical* is a favorite adjective, being a broad synonym for *good* or *right*), (b) emphasize personal conversion (often associated with terms like being *saved* or *born again*), (c) believe that God can be known and experienced with something like intimacy (expressed in terms like *having a personal relationship with God*), and (d) want to share their faith with others (by being *evangelistic*).[2]

From that understanding the term will be used with reference to evangelical character even when applied more directly to Evangelicalism.

This dissertation addresses the problems with evangelism from the perspective of persuasive communication. A variety of factors addressing evangelistic preaching will be organized under three separate considerations—historical perspective, theological basis,

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[2] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties Books, 2004), 117.

and communication theory—to present recommendations for more engaging approaches to evangelistic preaching.

Historical Perspectives

Historical perspective is invaluable for grasping the nature of the current problem as well as timeless principles that lead toward solution. The history of the modern period reveals a unique perspective on communication—how it is formed, how it is conveyed, and how it is received—especially when contrasted with postmodern characteristics. The modern era was marked by an epistemology of reason and logic. As a result, an overdue focus upon cognitive information defined the shape of the cultural context over the past few centuries. This, in turn, reinforced long-accepted assumptions regarding communication, requiring it to be based in reasonable argument and propositional statements. In the modern era, this has been an approach that served well the efforts of evangelistic preaching.

However, dramatic changes have taken place in Western philosophy and culture rendering the modern modes of communication less effective. The longer history of Christianity reveals the nature of the gospel with theological perspectives that inform evangelism and distinguish the gospel from the particular forms it takes relative to the context of each time and culture. It is apparent that much of the modern contextualization of the gospel has been adopted by evangelistic preaching so effectively for so long that to adapt now to changing culture proves extremely difficult.

At present, the magnitude of change indicates a fourth period emerging in human history. Following the recognized earlier periods of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern eras,

Western civilization, and in fact the world, is now entering the postmodern era. Only the

perspective of millennia renders these transitions as historical thresholds. In actuality

they are centuries in the making. However, world transitions of such enormous

magnitude occur through identifiable patterns. Victor Turner has addressed these

historical patterns under the label of "liminality" while describing rites of passage in folk

cultures in *The Ritual Process*, published in 1969.[3] Relating Turner's work specifically

to the Christian mission in North America, Alan Roxburgh composed *the Missionary

Congregation, Leadership, & Liminality* where he identified stages of liminal transition,

which are delineated in the latter part of chapter 1 of this dissertation. In contrast to

recent centuries, the Christian church now suffers what Roxburgh calls "marginality."

He writes that the church is "no longer at the cultural center. The emerging experience of

the churches is indeed that of being on the culture's margins."[4] With an even sharper

focus, Stanley Grenz addresses the same shift saying, "Twentieth century evangelicals

have devoted much energy to the task of demonstrating the credibility of the Christian

faith to a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science."[5] While this close association

served the church well in the past and situated it at the cultural center during the modern

era it now poses a great challenge for the future.

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[3] See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

[4] Alan Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 1.

[5] Stanley Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1996), 161.

Theological Considerations

In addition to the historical perspective, there are theological considerations necessary to fully understand the nature of the current problem with evangelistic preaching. Biblically and theologically, it is the essence of the gospel to transcend any particular contextualization. Lesslie Newbigin says, "Every communication of the gospel is already culturally conditioned."[6] As grand as the idea of a pure unadulterated gospel may sound, the actual character of God's redemption in Christ is bound together with particular times and places within human culture, and the gospel is in its very essence infinitely transferrable to every culture.

There already exists a robust conversation about the current problem with evangelism in America. A review of the literature provides substantial validation of assertions made in this present consideration of the matter, which will be evident in the remainder of this dissertation from various sources cited. Perspectives vary, but, in the abundance of thoughts, clear patterns emerge which offer informed guidance for developing an understanding of the issues involved. Both classical and contemporary voices address these issues, granting a scholarly and yet pragmatic perspective for consideration. Among the uncertainties in a period of cultural upheaval, the one perspective that seems evident is that evangelistic preaching should not simply continue replicating the past; rather, it must embrace change. Such change is not only the means to engage a dramatically shifting culture but is also a response in theological accordance with the very essence of the gospel to translate into every culture.

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[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1989), 142.

During the modern era, with its focus on reason and information, preaching developed a very decided lean toward instruction, presumably, though not exclusively, in favor of those already familiar with the Christian faith. With cultural changes, the distinction between instruction and missional proclamation, designed for listeners not yet convinced, is a needed emphasis for understanding evangelistic preaching. In a postmodern environment, it often becomes necessary to correct a commonly truncated modern understanding of the gospel, as though it were an isolated nucleus of information that stands independent from the cultural contexts to which it is applied.

At the heart of this dissertation, attention is given to the theological aspects related to engaging listeners. Along with valid concerns regarding accommodation, there remains the essential character of the gospel which is infinitely translatable into every culture and context. Both the content and character of evangelism in the New Testament bears this out. Additionally, the multifaceted character of preaching includes far more than evangelism. Therefore, attention is needed to identify the particular elements of evangelistic preaching as missional proclamation, distinct from other forms of preaching, and especially instruction.

Communication Issues

The shift from the modern era to the postmodern era is evident in modes of communication as well. While philosophical postmodernism addresses the validity of reason and objectivity, the cultural aspects of postmodernism have been fueled by the development of the computer and especially the rise of the Internet, which has made the availability of information and the dissemination of ideas much more prevalent and

immediate. With the inception of the information age, communication has been forever and dramatically altered.

As a result, there is an exaggerated contrast between modern and postmodern approaches when it comes to communication. Therefore, the place of preaching, an endeavor itself entirely subsumed within the sphere of communication, is especially critical at this juncture in history. Ironically, preaching has remained one of the more readily noticeable examples of the church's recalcitrance at forsaking a modern worldview.

In order for preaching to recover lost measures of effectiveness and, for that matter, to regain a hearing for the gospel in a postmodern world, it must adopt a posture of learning from other sectors in the culture that are excelling in communication. The subject of communication is a giant sphere including a complex array of factors; however, there are some emerging broad strokes that frame the direction most likely leading toward progress.

A great deal of research has explored the physiology of the human brain as it relates to emotional and psychological function. Elements of the brain's limbic system are pertinent to emotional response and decision-making. Factors affecting persuasion in other spheres of life inform the similar response in spiritual persuasion. A clear understanding of these factors strengthens a philosophy for evangelistic preaching since it is essentially persuasive communication.

A key characteristic of communication in a postmodern culture is the priority given to engaging the affective elements as much as if not more than cognitive reason. Robert Webber cites the example of pastor and writer David Hopkins, whose goal in

preaching is, "not just to 'transfer information' but to 'stimulate the mind.' The use of media to communicate is, he says, for the sole purpose of 'engaging a culture where we are.'"[7] The challenge of engaging not just the mind, but also the emotional experience of people in order to communicate in the changing culture of the present day is what Leonard Sweet describes as an "abductive method." After describing the strategy of modern approaches in preaching, using deductive methods and inductive methods, Sweet contrasts these with the abductive method where preaching will "seize people by the imagination and transport them from their current world to another world, where they gain a new perspective."[8] While this is not a new practice, the modern emphasis upon information often has eclipsed the imaginative element of preaching.

Changes in preaching have not kept pace with the changing face of communication in the culture. The culture is shifting communication modes to correspond to a postmodern worldview. Meanwhile, the Christian church continues in modes of communication that reflect the modern era of earlier centuries. Preaching among many evangelical churches today continues to be highly propositional, highly verbal, and highly presumptuous of listeners' attention.

More Engaging Approaches

At the twenty-first century, at a time when this hinge of history brings immense change to the world and its culture, it is a time for evangelistic preaching to come of age

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[7] Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 68.

[8] Leonard Sweet, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 31.

and embrace new strategies and approaches. True to its theological nature, the gospel

will translate into postmodern culture, and the function of preaching remains an essential

element of the gospel. The form of preaching, likewise, must adapt with an alertness to

embrace innovations in communication that are appropriate to a postmodern culture.

The considerations which follow will provide a framework for a deeper

understanding of the issues affecting evangelism in a shifting culture and provide a

theological imperative for evangelistic preaching. In the process, practical solutions will

serve as a summons to American preachers to exert renewed initiative for engaging

listeners beyond merely propagating information as necessary means to reverse the

current ebb of results. As a more engaging approach appropriate to the current cultural

context is embraced, the gospel may be communicated more effectively to accomplish its

intended potential of transforming lives and societal structures.

PART ONE:

CHRISTIANITY WITHIN THE EVOLVING WESTERN CULTURE

CHAPTER 1

CULTURAL SHIFT FROM MODERN ERA TO POSTMODERN ERA

The current problem of cultural marginalization facing evangelism in America has

not always hindered the church; rather it is a relatively new problem. Great Awakenings,

Revivals, the rise of Evangelicalism, and Church Growth are highlights of the religious

history of America. The present decline and wane in effectiveness reflects a significant

shift. Something has changed. A theological case made in Part Two asserts the problem

is not with the gospel itself, nor is it with the method of evangelistic preaching, but with

the particular contextualization of these to the modern culture. This rationale is evident

when the historical perspective of dramatic cultural shift is shown.

The Modern Era Distinguished in History and the Present

There are pressing new challenges for communicating the gospel in the twenty-

first century due to the dramatic changes occurring in the world at this time. The present

era is emerging as one of what Reggie McNeal calls "hinge points in history."[9] The

transition from the modern era to a postmodern era represents a global shift that

corresponds to only three other previous periods in human history where sweeping

changes had such a global impact. The first was the shift from the prehistoric era to

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[9] McNeal, *The Present Future*, 120.

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ancient civilization at roughly 2500 BC.[10] The ancient world then shifted to the medieval

period around 500 AD, which endured until the transition into the modern period at

around 1500 AD.[11]

The transition from the medieval era to the modern era is predominantly

associated with Western culture. Historical reference is often made to "continental"

rationalism because the European continent was the arena for philosophical developments

that gave rise to the modern era. The further distinction between the rationalism of the

European continent and the empiricism identified with Britain is also worth noting due to

its particular impact on scientific development, but, at this point, it is merely for the

purpose of identifying the geographical and historical context that the term "continental"

is introduced. Eventually, the impact of the modern era would touch all places of the

globe and particularly North America. Initially, though, modern rationalism was a

European development. Beginning at the end of the fifteenth century, there occurred a

rapid convergence of several interrelated factors, each contributing to the dramatic shift

resulting in a new way of perceiving the world.

The earliest of significant contributing factors was Gutenberg's invention of the

movable type printing press in 1450. Historical chronicler J. M. Roberts identifies this

development,

> Although the details are obscure, and experiments with wood letters were going
> on at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Haarlem, there seems to be no good
> reason not to credit it to the man whose name has traditionally been associated
> with it, Johannes Gutenberg, the diamond polisher of Mainz. In about 1450 he

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[10] J. M. Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World: Fifth Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 39.

[11] Ibid., 315.

and his colleagues brought the elements of modern printing together and in 1455 there appeared what is agreed to be the first true book printed in Europe, the Gutenberg Bible.[12]

The printing press greatly accelerated the dissemination of ideas, ultimately serving as a springboard for the eventual development of the information age, which is discussed below. Initially, the impact of the printing press was to elevate the speed and breadth of philosophical conversation. J. M. Roberts further indicates the significance printing had upon culture by making large numbers of copies of books easily available.

> When this happened, the impact of books was vastly magnified. This was true of all classes of book—poetry, history, philosophy, technology and above all, the Bible itself. The effect was the most profound change in the diffusion of knowledge and ideas since the invention of writing; it was the greatest cultural revolution of these centuries. With hindsight it can be seen as the start of an acceleration of the diffusion of information which is still underway.[13]

The printing of information aided the groundswell of public opinion required to foster movement of cultural magnitude. The printing press was a significant element in Martin Luther's posting of his *Ninety-five Theses* nailed to the wooden door of Castle Church in Wittenberg Germany in 1517, protesting religious practices being propagated by the Catholic Church. This single incident, aided by the printing of copies for rapid dissemination, has become the recognized launch of the Protestant Reformation. Chris Harman identifies the historical connection between the printing press and the Protestant reformation.

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[12] Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World,* 541-542.

[13] Ibid., 541.

In the same way, Luther's challenge to the papacy would not have been able to find such a huge audience. In fact, the printing press ensured the ground was already prepared for his ideas.[14]

Perhaps as significant as the theological content of the protest, and more significant even than the demonstration of the power of printed information for shaping thought, is the clear and overt challenge to the authority of the church that was to become a defining characteristic of the modern era. The Protestant Reformation, epitomized by the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin, was a preview of much more that was to follow. The philosophy that originated as skepticism, questioning, and challenges to authority emerged further as a theory of epistemology that is based on some merit of authority beyond merely the hierarchical assertion of any given ruling power, be it church or king.

Another groundswell of public opinion arose in 1543 with the publishing of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs) by Nicolaus Copernicus.[15] By presenting a helio-centric view of the universe, Copernicus defied the long held belief that the earth was the center of the universe. The previous geocentric view was backed by the authority of the church in a medieval system of determining truth and knowledge via mystery and revelation. Copernicus was ostracized for introducing ideas contrary to the church's authority. In presenting controversial ideas he stands as a prototype of the fomenting tide that was beginning to challenge the church's authority. Further, he demonstrated the means of using print to quickly disseminate information

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[14] Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World: From the Stone Age to the New Millennium* (New York: Verso Books, 2008), 179.

[15] Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World,* 683.

formulating thought into shared opinion undergirding cultural movements. Though

vilified by the church for his views, new ground was being broken for questioning long-

held assumptions. The ensuing robust skepticism, along with the intense opposition

aligned against it, became a fundamental characteristic of the philosophy that eventually

came to define the modern period, in sharp contrast to the medieval worldview. "From

such a perspective the Copernican worldview was as subversive as the views of Luther or

Calvin."[16]

Beginning in 1618, the European continent was engulfed in thirty years of

religious wars fought between Catholics and Protestants. What began as theological

difference gradually developed into a general, political war involving most of Europe.

The casualty rate throughout Europe was so immense that the entire population was

reduced by close to 20 percent. The enormous toll of human life paid to settle disputes of

authority brought into question many of the long-held assumptions of the medieval period

about the basis of and credibility of what is proclaimed to be truth. Great loss of life

generated the large scale disillusionment that was to become the cultural catalyst for

sweeping changes introducing the modern era. The result was a philosophical shift in

how knowledge was gained. Among the disillusioned thought leaders of the day seeking

a remedy to the tragedy was the French mathematician René Descartes, often referred to

as the "Father of Modern Philosophy." Though maligned by the Catholic Church in his

own era, he is now recognized as the originator of deductive philosophy.

> The French philosopher Descartes formulated what he found to be satisfactory
> philosophical defenses of religious belief and Christian truth coherent with his
> technically skeptical approach to his subject. This did not prevent him (or the

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[16] Harman, *A People's History of the World,* 240.

philosophical movement which took its name from him, Cartesianism) from attracting the hostility of the Church.[17]

Though a mathematician by practice, René Descartes is the most recognized leader of modern philosophy for the impact of his writings in shaping seventeenth-century philosophy. After witnessing the devastating effects of competing views, he sought to provide some means by which opposing parties might find agreement for a more peaceable dialogue. In his treatise *Discourse on Method*, published in 1637, Descartes presented a philosophical method based in a fundamental set of principles that can be known without doubt. He was "convinced a complete understanding of the world could be deduced from a few unchallengeable principles of reason."[18] Beginning with basic beliefs as irrefutable and undoubtable foundations, then using a framework of deductive logic, there could be constructed a system of knowledge that had authority, not in the arbitrary declaration of whatever competing view held the strongest power, but in the ostensibly unbiased soundness of reason. Further attention will be given to the epistemological method of rationalism below and its impact on shaping communication, but here it is simply acknowledged as the chief characteristic distinguishing the modern era in history from the medieval period. What originated as an effort to have warring factions stop killing and start talking, ultimately evolved into the rational basis for the Enlightenment.

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[17] Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World,* 686.

[18] Harman, *A People's History of the World,* 242.

Enlightenment and the Information Age

The epistemology of rationalism formulated by Descartes quickly became the means for seventeenth century philosophy to address the cultural disillusionment of the Thirty Years' War and to engage skepticism, or the questioning method of challenging the assumptions and authority of the church. Brilliant minds started to question everything. Thus began the gradual process resulting in the detachment of philosophy from theology. Eventually, the intellectual method was applied to all spheres of life and fostered what has been called the scientific revolution. Additional contributions to rational philosophy in the seventeenth century were made by many, most notably Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz.[19] Simultaneous with rationalism on the European continent was a similar rise in empiricism, more readily identified with Britain during the same period. Empiricism featured an epistemology based, not on reason as in rationalism, but on experience or sensation, with its leading contributors being John Locke, George Berkeley, and David Hume. Far from being incompatible alternatives to one another, both rationalism and empiricism were means of addressing truth from a deductive process, in contrast to the medieval scholasticism, which was based in arbitrary divine revelation. Collectively, the rise of philosophy in the seventeenth century was the milieu in which the Enlightenment was born.

> The more intellectually aware sections of the middle and even the upper, classes elsewhere in Europe began to feel that their societies were defective, and sought to bring change by changing ideas. This led to a much more far-reaching attack on prejudice and superstition than had occurred in the Renaissance and Reformation. The result was a current of ideas known as the Enlightenment.[20]

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[19] Harman, *A People's History of the World,* 242

[20] Ibid.

For the next few centuries the intellectual and philosophical method of objective reasoning became the normative means of establishing the source and basis of authority for truth. In the realm of the sciences, great advances were made using the scientific method to establish truths on the basis of reason. In philosophy, the same intellectual method cultivated what were considered to be objective absolutes.

One outcome of the Enlightenment was the proliferation of information. The benefit of the printing press coupled with the epistemological method of reason advanced an enormous increase in the publishing of information. The abundance of readily available information shaped the character of Western culture in education, philosophy, and science.

The Formation of Constructs in Modern Thought

The modern era was itself, initially a metaphysical paradigm shift in order to explain better the understanding of reality in light of disturbing issues of the day, including the disillusionment arising from religious wars. Descartes introduced an epistemological method applying human reason as a means to arrive at foundational "undoubtable" absolutes. Then, with reason upon reason, there could be constructed universal objective principles. The further contribution of Isaac Newton was to define objective absolutes as "laws." The intellectual method of applying these laws of reason resulted in the construction of objective thought and ultimately a scientific method, bringing with it a revolution of its own.

Consequently, by its impact upon modes of communication, much of the modern form of preaching has adopted deductive reasoning in a natural move of contextualization. The modern fascination with information formulated into propositions became all too easy to equate with proclamation. Equating the two reduced proclamation to lifeless intellectual statements, presumed to have inherent authority. It is such reductionist proclamation that Brian McLaren targets as "arrogant intellectualizing," providing a rebuke that he says, "is especially apt for modern Christians, who do not build cathedrals of stone and glass as in the Middle Ages, but rather conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument."[21] To modern listeners, these statements ring out with resonant truth, regardless of whether or not they result in any effect upon listeners.

However, to postmodern listeners, who do not share all the presuppositions presumed by a modern metanarrative, propositions do not necessarily carry authority apart from some useful outcome or result. This is what Stanley Grenz refers to when he says, "Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentation of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships."[22]

Postmodern Contrasts

The postmodern era originated under circumstances similar to the modern era, involving disillusionment from World War II and the Holocaust. Likewise,

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[21] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a…* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties Books, 2004), 151.

[22] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 169.

postmodernism was initiated from the realm of philosophy. Grenz points out that "the

term *postmodern* may first have been coined in the 1930s to refer to a major historical

transition already underway."[23]

> The work of [Jacques] Derrida, [Michel] Foucault, and [Richard] Rorty
> reflects what seems to have become the central dictum of postmodern philosophy:
> "All is difference." This view sweeps away the "uni" of the "universe" sought by
> the Enlightenment project. It abandons the quest for a unified grasp of objective
> reality. It asserts that the world has no center, only differing viewpoints and
> perspectives. In fact even the concept of "world" presupposes an objective unity
> or a coherent whole that does not exist "out there." In the end, the postmodern
> world is merely an arena of "dueling texts."[24]

With the techniques of literary deconstructionism, the modern notions of

objective absolutes and foundational reason were being undermined, opening the door for

a next revolution. The effect this approach has had on modern thinking has been

described as "Chastened Rationality."[25] The empirical laws of reason that emerged with

the Enlightenment no longer held the philosophical sway they had enjoyed for centuries.

Rationality had long been the metanarrative on which all understanding ultimately

rested. With a philosophical shift of paradigm, the scientific "realist" metanarrative no

longer retained the credibility it had long been afforded. In exchange, there arose a

diverse plurality of relative social constructs, each reflecting, not absolute understanding

with meaning inherent, but pragmatic understanding with meaning being ascribed on the

basis of usefulness.

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[23] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

[24] Ibid., 7.

[25] Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 23.

In the decades to follow, postmodernism would impact far more than philosophical paradigms. Referring to the ethos spawned by postmodern philosophers, Grenz goes on to describe the impact made upon culture.

> Eventually, the adoption of the new ethos became so widespread that the designation "postmodern" crystallized as the overarching label for a diverse social and cultural phenomenon. The postmodern storm swept through various aspects of culture and several academic disciplines, most notably influencing literature, architecture, film, and philosophy.[26]

As the implications of postmodernism have become more pronounced in the culture, the resulting contrast with modern culture becomes more acute. The lines between old and new are growing sharper than ever before, and between them, there is a growing gap of irrelevance and discontinuity.

The shift from the Modern era to the Postmodern era follows recognized and predictable historical patterns. Earlier references to the work of Victor Turner and Alan Roxburgh identified predictable sociological patterns in history as stages of liminal cultural transition. With particular focus on the marginalization of the Christian church in the West, Roxburgh describes "three phases of transition in any rites of passage process: separation, liminal, reaggregation."[27] According to these phases the current stage of postmodernism has passed from separation into liminality. While some sectors of mainstream culture are indicating the beginning of a reaggregation phase, the Christian church has continued in a phase of liminal transition. Religion is a sector of the cultural milieu which historically lags behind philosophy and art at undergoing transition. The

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[26] Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 16.

[27] Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation*, 27.

current delayed response at reaggregation is due in part to how strongly the Christian church has been tied to the modern world and its character. In particular, the Protestant reformation emerged concurrently with the previous world transition at the time of the Enlightenment era. The current marginality of the Christian church in the West is a reflection of its deeply entrenched association with modernity.

One striking indicator of this marginality is the decline in church membership in America. Philip Jenkins cites statistics from the *World Christian Encyclopedia* to demonstrate the numerical trends among Christianity throughout the world shifting away from Europe and America. He says, "Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America."[28] He adds further,

> This global perspective should make us think carefully before asserting "what Christians believe" or "how the church is changing." All too often, statements about what "modern Christians accept" or what "Catholics today believe" refer only to what that ever-shrinking remnant of *Western* Christians and Catholics believe. Such assertions are outrageous today, and as time goes by they will become ever further removed from reality.[29]

Within the distinctly American context Reggie McNeal reviews statistical analysis to demonstrate the demographic of decline relative to generations and says, "The further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each

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[28] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

[29] Ibid., 3.

succeeding generation reports going to church."[30] When reviewing the decline relative to

other parameters he adds further, "For evangelicals, the situation looks even bleaker."[31]

This perspective is often disguised from within Evangelical megachurches, where

there appears to be rapid growth with attendance at an all-time high. This proves to be a

very localized perspective produced by merger and acquisition while the larger statistic

continues in marked decline. This occurrence is described by Lesslie Newbigin,

> We have lived for so many centuries in the "Christendom" situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of pastoral care of existing congregations. In a situation of declining numbers, the policy has been to abandon areas (such as inner cities) where active Christians are few and to concentrate ministerial resources by merging congregations and deploying ministers in the places where there are enough Christians to support them. Needless to say, this simply accelerates the decline.[32]

Although it would be inaccurate to pose a direct correlation between modernity

and declining church membership, what is clear is that declining numbers is a reflection

of the sweeping changes occurring in American culture. The "centuries in the

'Christendom' situation" that Newbigin refers to points to an era when Christianity held a

central status in the mainstream culture. While there currently are existing congregations

that maintain a strong presence in cultural life, these are becoming more the exception

than the norm; and as a whole the state of churches in America is suffering decline.

The Christian church in the late twentieth century suffered a waning effectiveness

in producing results while continuing to use the manner of preaching it had employed in

earlier periods. This has led Erwin McManus to write, "The gospel, as presented in our

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[30] McNeal, *The Present Future*, 3.

[31] Ibid., 4.

[32] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 235-236,

time, has been crafted in a way that would only win Christians to Christ."[33] It has lost

effectiveness at captivating, let alone convincing, those who are not already believers.

Timothy Downs speaks of Christians in the world today and adds, "They are superbly

prepared to answer questions that non-Christians quit asking two generations ago."[34]

There is a widespread frustration of pastors that resonates with the words of Brian

McLaren.

> I preach sermons that earn the approving nods of the lifelong churchgoers, because they repeat the expected vocabulary and formulations, words that generally convey little actual meaning after hearing them fifty-two times a year, year after year, but work like fingers, massaging the weary souls of earnest people. Meanwhile, as the initiated relax under this massage of familiar words, as they emit an almost audible "ahhh" to hear their cherished vocabulary again, these very massaging messages leave the uninitiated furrowing their brows, shaking their heads, and shifting in their seats. They do this sometimes because they don't understand but even more when they do understand—because the very formulations that sound so good and familiar to the "saved" sound downright weird or even wicked to the "seekers" and the skeptics.[35]

The modern approach to preaching, with its heavy emphasis on reason and

information, is showing signs of fatigue in a culture that now operates far more in the

realm of experience. Information is no longer regarded as an end in itself, but now holds

value only insofar as it produces some useful outcome.

For evangelistic preaching, what is required for the challenge is described by

Lesslie Newbigin as "new energies for the contemporary mission of the church, not only

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[33] Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 52.

[34] Timothy Downs, *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community…While We Still Can* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 99.

[35] Brian McLaren *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), xiii.

in its global dimensions, but also in its application to the tough new paganism of the contemporary Western world."[36]   There is a pervasive sense that the old ways are no longer working. Though there are exceptions with truly gifted communicators, the culture has moved while Christian preaching has largely remained the same, resulting in a growing disconnection of relevant effectiveness. A changing world is now calling for new approaches to communicate the gospel. While there is an amazing power of one person standing and speaking to others, consistent with the ever-transcendent character of the timeless message of the gospel, its relevance in the future demands that rigorous attention be given to the manner in which preaching is done.

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[36] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 2.

CHAPTER 2

MARGINALIZATION OF THE CHRISTIAN VOICE IN MAINSTREAM CULTURE

The Christian voice adapted especially well into the mainstream of American culture during the modern era. However, the ready success of evangelical Christianity resulted in the defining of that voice, and the message it speaks, with a character that is distinctly modern. Having such a strong association, if not entrenchment, with modern culture unfortunately has become the reason for Christianity's declining influence in time of transition. The very assumptions which led to effectiveness at persuasively engaging listeners in previous centuries no longer hold sway, particularly for the unbelieving population to whom evangelistic preaching is aimed. Efforts to re-engage in the mainstream cultural conversation must release long-entrenched modern assumptions by embracing postmodern culture and its assumptions as well as its modes of communication.

The current marginalization of the Christian voice in mainstream culture is directly related to its strong association with the modern era's systematic modes of thought. The empiricism of modern times, marked by the primacy of cohesive structures of rationale with logical correspondence, has in turn fostered broad uniformity in elaborately organized systems of thought and function. Everything from mass production in industry to binary code in information reflects the modern effort to unify matters into a

coherent system. Christianity, particularly Protestant reformed Christianity, has adopted

this modern approach by formulating systems of theology involving objective articles

laws and principles, usually stated in propositional form.

The consequent result is a strong tendency on the part of evangelistic preaching to

articulate the message of the gospel predominantly in the language, ideas, and constructs

that have been codified during the modern period. The Christian religion, Christian

theology, and for many, the individual experience of faith has become based foremost in

the proper alignment of correct information. While alternative modes exist in the form of

music, stories, art, symbol, and other modes of expression, even these are often validated

by the degree to which they convey accurate information.

In this atmosphere education and instruction have been elevated so high they

threaten to eclipse mystery, feeling, intuition, symbol, and myth much less unexplained

phenomena like dreams and clairvoyance. However, the mainstream culture of the

postmodern West has begun to embrace and even prefer such subjectivities for defining

truth and reality, themselves subjective terms for expressing meaning, reflective of

interpretive perception. This trend is abundantly evident in art, literature and philosophy;

and in recent decades even the physical sciences have presented advanced theories

marked by relativity and subjectivity so that postulations are routinely qualified by the

acknowledged limitations of empirical "constants" like time, matter, dimension, and

spatial location. [37]

The reluctance of the Christian voice to embrace language and thought that is

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[37] See comments on "antisense" in Leonard Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic*, (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1991), 267.

relative and subjective in order to articulate its message has resulted in a deteriorating prominence in the cultural conversation. It is helpful to make a distinction between the truth that evangelism purveys and the modes used to express it. Elements of Christianity remain timeless, but the language to engage the culture is what demands renewed initiative. In order take such initiative there is a task of dismantling that must occur. Modern cultural assumptions and theological formulations expressed in cognitive propositions, as well as the structure of institutions that perpetuate them, are now being considered and even scrutinized for the role these have had in the marginalization that currently exists. Simultaneously, voices within American evangelicalism in response to the problem are emerging in search of a solution or means to re-engage the cultural conversation.

The Rise of Modern Seminaries

The modern era spawned an information age beginning with the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century. A historical shift in culture was inaugurated forming the transition from the medieval era to the modern era hastened by a revolution in the breadth and speed of communication. As large a role as information played in shaping cultural character, the change in the speed of communication effected a change in the way information itself was regarded. Instead of merely the means to ulterior ends, information became an end in itself. Constructs of knowledge, defined by blocks of reasonably established information, became the basis for truth and authority during the modern era.

A changing regard for information permeated all spheres of life. The elevation of sciences featured the prominence of information. Developments in industry were marked by automated specialization dependent on systems of information. Likewise, the processes of political, economic, social and various forms of cultural advancement were propagated primarily by increases in information. The perpetuation of information fueled itself crossing cultural sectors and increasing exponentially. For example, technological advancements in the sector of manufacturing would in turn result in accounting advancements in economics, which would directly and indirectly affect social developments in government. The resulting frenzy of accumulated knowledge was instrumental in generating an entire Age of Information.

Among the various cultural sectors reshaped by burgeoning information during the modern era education especially was affected. The development of education from medieval scholasticism to the Modern university and then to specialized schools and institutions is detailed by J. M. Roberts,

> The institutional fabric of society, it is true, showed also the onset of innovation. One of the reasons why universities lost importance in these centuries was that they no longer monopolized the intellectual life of Europe. From the middle of the seventeenth century there appeared in many countries, and often under the highest patronage, academies and learned societies such as the English Royal Society, which was given a charter in 1662, or the French Academie des Sciences, founded four years later. In the eighteenth century such associations greatly multiplied; they were diffused through smaller towns and founded with more limited and special aims, such as the promotion of agriculture.[38]

The proliferation of academic institutions, during a time when the theological character of Europe was marked by systematic structures of codified information, created fertile soil for the development of seminaries among other specialized educational

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[38] Roberts, *The New Penguin History of the World,* 675-676.

institutions. Both the structure of education, institutionally and academically, as well as the substance of education have been dramatically affected by the prolific availability of vast amounts of information. With the Enlightenment regard for knowledge educational systems defined learning nearly synonymously with the transfer and accumulation of information.

Conversely, in a later development Michael Polanyi would articulate the character of "personal knowledge"[39] as a subjective acquisition gained by means other than direct instruction, distinct from merely the transfer of information. Polyani, however, is recognized as a distinctly postmodern perspective, and his description of personal knowledge represents a departure from the restrictive character of learning during the centuries of the modern era. His mention at this point serves to reinforce the distinctly modern character of education as reducing knowledge to almost entirely the acquiring of accurate information.

With the proliferation of information the character of education in the modern era became much more based in content. This is not to imply that the education in ancient and medieval eras lacked content, but the Modern era has nearly reduced education to the assimilation of information alone as an end in itself. In scientific and technical disciplines this may actually be quite acceptable, even desired; however, in the arts, which includes communication and preaching, adequacy is greatly diminished when information is sterilized of all subjective and affective elements.

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[39] See Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

Furthermore, the modern development in education promoted specialization in academic disciplines. During the late modern period, among these disciplines, there was a proliferation of theological seminaries. Collectively the rise of seminary education fostered a uniform character of systematic instruction of clergy across a broad spectrum.

One particular focus for evangelistic preaching is the manner and methods of training clergy. Much of what is practiced in evangelistic preaching traces back to the formation of concepts and skills acquired by clergy in seminary education. The net effect is the permeation of North American clergy educated in a consistently uniform systematic mode of instruction. Seminaries in the modern era trained clergy in skills of theology, hermeneutics, and homiletics with an overly modern character of reasoned argument, sustained logic, propositional information, and orderly content. Hence, clergy were trained to preach precisely as professors were trained to instruct. The presumption being that evangelistic persuasion consisted of convincing listeners of the veracity of the content in a sermon. Furthermore, the assumption was that an orderly outline of information presented is the best, or at least a readily acceptable, way to be persuasive.

During an era when the Christian religion represented the epicenter of the mainstream culture it is clear how a uniform influence shaped the culture and specifically the religious subculture with a very identifiable character in the twentieth century. Even with theological diversity and ecclesiastical variety a fairly consistent understanding emerged regarding how people "hear and respond" to the gospel. However, the manner of preaching the gospel was dictated by the dominant educational model of the period.

A great deal of the character of evangelistic preaching in churches these days reflects how the clergy have been trained. Commenting on this, Fred Craddock says,

"Some ministers I know still feel guilty, twenty years after seminary, when they preach with styles not blessed by a homiletics class."[40] Most of the training clergy receive in seminary reflects the systematic modes typical of the modern era for presenting information.

While it is true that evangelism is not limited to trained pastors preaching Sunday sermons in church, the significance of Seminaries for evangelistic preaching is due to the substantial influence upon clergy. Common experiences among clergy have caused them to question the modern assumptions underlying seminary-trained methodologies for evangelistic preaching. On the one side there occurs the increasingly regular result of exceptional methodology resulting in limited response. Situations where theological, biblical, hermeneutical, and homiletical technique is of exceptional quality leave listeners relatively unpersuaded, much less powerfully transformed by the message. By contrast, other situations result in dramatic responsiveness to the message even though attention to homiletical & hermeneutical methodology is noticeably limited. A growing body of evidence suggests the correlation between modern methodology and evangelistic persuasion was not necessarily a direct correlation. This idea is expressed by Reggie McNeal when he says, "You can build the perfect church—and they still won't come."[41]
He expounds by saying,

> The correct response, then to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church's decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix.[42]

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[40] Fred Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 88.

[41] McNeal, *The Present Future*, 10.

[42] Ibid., 18.

Perhaps during the transitional decades of the twentieth century more than at any time in recent history, the experience of clergy was a growing disconnect between the theoretical instruction received during formal training and the measurable results in actual practice. A common sentiment among clergy is that when effectiveness has been gained for evangelistic preaching it has resulted from a source other than formal theological training, and in many cases, contrary to basic assumptions perpetuated in seminary education. Consequently, there is a renewed effort to accommodate changing reality into the infrastructure of theological training by establishing a new framework for disentangling the timeless core message of Christian gospel from the distinctly modern contextualization and rearticulating the same universal truth in assumptions, concepts, and language that reflects the emerging context of the postmodern era.

Recent years have witnessed seminaries themselves exploring other elements in persuasive communication, not necessarily replacing modern methodologies, but incorporating supplemental elements to be considered and utilized in training of clergy for evangelistic preaching. However, there still remains a highly informational character of evangelism based on an education model reflective of modern empiricism and the manner in which it has uniquely contextualized the gospel.

The Gospel Contextualized in Cognitive Propositions

Sermons in the modern era reflect the predisposition toward objective information and systematic structure. Systematized Christianity produced preaching that is information based, and information-based preaching is built around outlines, structures,

and propositional declarations. Consequently evangelistic preaching in modern times has often equated the cognitive propositions about the gospel with the gospel itself.

Not just in the modern era, but in every age, evangelistic preaching will constantly face the challenge of distinguishing between the gospel and specific contextualization of the gospel. Lesslie Newbigin has addressed this dilemma by saying,

> "Missionaries...have become more aware of the fact that in their presentation of the gospel they have often confused culturally conditioned perceptions with the substance of the gospel, and thus wrongfully claimed divine authority for the relativities of one culture." [43]

It becomes a challenge to define the gospel in terms transcendent of any particular culture. Recognizing this difficulty Newbigin adds,

> The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is, in fact, an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part, and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life. There can never be a culture-free gospel. Yet the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one in which it was originally embodied." [44]

The notion of a pure unadulterated gospel stripped of its cultural trappings is "an illusion, there can never be a culture-free gospel." As Fred Craddock has said, "Christian truth is simply not transmitted objectively as a thing, a statement, a piece of information, autonomous and unrelated to speaker and hearer." [45] The culture-bound character of the gospel is true even in its original announcement in the person of Jesus Christ.

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[43] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 2.

[44] Ibid., 4.

[45] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 39.

Now clearly this announcement is itself culturally conditioned. It does not come down from heaven or by the mouth of an angel. The words *Jesus Christ* are the Greek rendering of a Hebrew name and title, *Joshua the Messiah*. They belong to and are part of the culture of one part of the world -- the eastern Mediterranean -- at one point in history when Greek was the most widespread international language in the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. Neither at the beginning, nor at any subsequent time, is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in a culturally conditioned form of words.[46]

This of course, raises a great deal of question about what may or may not be accurately described as the gospel distinct from any particular cultural contextualization of the gospel. Too much contextualization permitted and elements of Jesus and Christian history and tradition become dispensable in a pluralistic relativism. Too much timeless element permitted and great sectors of Christian witness in the world today become invalidated by a narrow exclusivity. In between the extremes there lies lively debate about the intricacies of elements contextualized and elements with no respect for context.

Constructive dialogue proceeds less by hard and fast answers as much as by identifiable patterns and cultural examples to shape indefinite yet shared understanding. In this way distinctions can be made between the influence of a message upon the lives of listeners and culture and the language and symbols used to articulate the message. When applied to evangelistic preaching there may be a variety of forms used to present the gospel. The modern era produced a cultural context where technical language was a preferred mode of presentation.

Contextualization refers to the unique characteristics of culture, which includes specific elements of communication—language, relevant idioms and metaphors, and

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[46] Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 4.

expressions. For evangelism contextual communication addresses the interpretation of

the Bible and how its message is conveyed, but also the manner of persuasion. In the

modern era cognitive proposition proved to be a very effective mode of persuasive

communication. So much so, that in a transition period it becomes difficult to distinguish

between the cognitive propositions that have emerged to express the gospel from the

gospel itself or even the biblical language used to express it. Modern gospel propositions

are often preached as gospel even though the statements and phrases of these are found

nowhere in the scriptures; and have limited reference in contexts other than Western and

modern culture. William Dyrness describes the unique character of the gospel presented

in an American context marked by an emphasis on personal development. He then cites

several examples,

> So Robert Schuller, whom we look at in the next chapter, deals with self
> esteem; Billy Grahm talks about peace with God; and the famous four spiritual
> laws focus on the broken relationship with God and its consequences. These and
> many other approaches to evangelism are often criticized as not being fully
> biblical, which indeed may be the case.[47]

The Waning of Prevailing Modern Assumptions

The Christian religion was the epicenter of the Western culture in the modern

period, as well as the Medieval period before. As such it was not presumptuous to

assume the general population held awareness, if not belief, in basic elements of shared

truth that serve as preliminary foundations for evangelism. In the "tough new paganism

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[47] William A. Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 101.

of the contemporary Western world"[48] it is no longer reasonable to assume that the

general population is familiar with the Bible, much less regard it as authoritative truth.

Similarly, in the mainstream culture of the twenty-first century the notion of God does

not have a uniform reference that may be assumed without further explanation of which

god is meant, or what exactly is meant by god. In Part II of this dissertation, specific

assumptions of biblical and theological truth will be addressed. Likewise, assumptions

regarding evangelism in and of itself, how its effectiveness is measured, the relationship

between Christianity and other faiths, are theological subjects to be explored in light of

postmodern culture.   However, at this point the general assumptions being considered

are those in reference to the nature of truth, reality, and authority.

Among the different assumptions between modern perspectives and postmodern

perspectives, one particular case is the regard for truth. The contrast is well described by

Ronald J. Allen.

> "Modernists thought they could attain a pure, objective awareness of the world. According to the notion of truth based on correspondence, a statement is true when it corresponds in a one-to-one fashion with reality. Scientific observation should lead to an understanding of the world that is universally and absolutely true. According to the notion of truth based on coherence, a statement is true when it logically coheres with principles that are universally valid. Many modern philosophers believed that language can be used with precision to describe the world with scientific accuracy. The modern preacher attempted to offer an understanding of Christian faith that was consistent with Enlightenment presuppositions concerning truth.
> Postmodern thinkers, however, reject the assumption that we can possess pure, undistorted knowledge of the world. All awareness is interpretation, a matter of social construction. Communities create the categories with which they perceive the world. These descriptions do not simply describe the world as it really is, but express a community's interpretation of the world. We can never

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[48] This descriptor was coined by Lesslie Newbigin as cited earlier on p. 25 of this dissertation.

have access to statements that correspond in a one-to-one fashion with reality. We only have access to interpretations of the world."[49]

As postmodern culture emerges it does not necessarily nullify modern culture as much as advances beyond it. As a result it would be more accurate to describe modern ways as "exceeded" rather than "abandoned" or "wrong." In any transition there is a resistance to change. It seems at times that the success of Christian evangelism in the modern era has rendered it very resistant to changes. Unfortunately, there is no corrective measure suggesting modern assumptions for evangelism are wrong, merely that such assumptions are waning in effectiveness. Those clinging to modern assumptions for evangelism do so without opposition, but they share decreasing company with likeminded others as the years go by. There is a widespread malaise in Western evangelicalism that is taking sharp notice of this trend. Even while newer assumptions are vaguely defined in a postmodern context, they are finding receptivity from a growing company of those for whom modern assumptions no longer hold sway.

Emerging Responses of American Evangelicalism

There is a growing body of response within American evangelicalism to formulate new assumptions for evangelism that re-engage the mainstream cultural conversation. It would be inaccurate to state that clear theses of postmodern evangelism are gaining consensus, the diversity of thought is far too unfounded as yet for anything like that. However, there are emerging common themes that arise from varied sectors, lending credibility to the intuitive developments that are occurring at present.

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[49] Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching and Postmodernism." *Interpretation* 55, no. 1 (2001), 35.

As early as the turn of the twentieth century notable voices were indicating a problem had arisen with preaching and there was a need to identify ways to bridge gaps and cross boundaries that were becoming prevalent in the cultural landscape. Completely apart from any effort to address postmodern issues, there had been early indication even from a thoroughly modern perspective that a new approach would be necessary. In 1907 P. T. Forsyth addressed "The Preacher and the Age" as one of his Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching at Yale University. Contrasting the times of that period with that of the earlier Reformation period he said,

> Everybody in civilization then belonged to the church. And even after the Reformation it was only a question of which Church a man belonged to; it was not whether he belonged to Church or world, whether he was Christian or pagan.
>   But to-day it is the latter question that we ask. The bulk of the civilized public of Europe, practically, either belong to no Church, or they are indifferent to which Church they belong. And most culture is rather with the world than with the Gospel.[50]

While considering the possible solution to the dilemma of cultural marginalization Forsyth warns against what he calls "repristination" or seeking to return or recapture what has been lost. "We cannot go back to the fountain head and simply ignore the 2,000 years of Christian evolution."[51] While the strength of the lecture is against accommodation, the tone clearly indicates that the church's preaching must engage the culture. "We must, of course, go some way to meet the world, but when we do meet we must do more than greet."[52] It is this same tension between accommodation and isolation that is consistently reflected in further responses from American evangelicalism.

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[50] P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) , 121.

[51] Ibid., 143.

[52] Ibid., 131.

By the middle of the century representative voices were clearly acknowledging

the problem preaching faced in a changing America and were actively exploring possible

solutions to re-engage the rapidly shifting culture. Clyde Fant represents a common

perspective,

> Preaching must recognize that it stands between the attraction of two powerful
> poles: to its right, "the faith once delivered," the historical given of the eternal
> Word; to its left, the present situation, the existential given of our own
> contemporary culture. Christian proclamation is intimately connected with
> both.[53]

The indispensability of culture has already been asserted for an accurate

understanding of the gospel. While the contemporary culture must be considered in order

to fully grasp the implication of the gospel, doing so is also a means to re-engage the

cultural conversation.

The need to balance the timeless gospel with the contemporary setting is a

common theme among evangelical responses. However, others view even stronger the

need for corrective action in order to rectify the imbalance. Corrective action is

intentionally overdone as Fred Craddock points out by citing Soren Kirkegaard,

> He who must apply a "corrective" must study accurately and profoundly the weak
> side of the establishment, and then vigorously and one-sidedly present the
> opposite. Precisely in this consists the corrective, and in this too the resignation
> of him who has to apply it. The corrective will in a sense be sacrificed to the
> established order.[54]

Many of the emerging responses arising after the middle of the twentieth century

in America reflected the polemical tone, undoubtedly some as corrective, others as

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[53] Clyde Fant, *Preaching for Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 28.

[54] Ibid., 46-47.

desperation. In the minds of some the situation had gone so far as to merit

accommodation to the culture merely to regain a spot at the table, much less have a voice,

in the conversation. "Postmodern" had become a buzzword for rallying cultural

relevance for Christianity well beyond evangelistic preaching.

By the end of the twentieth century a full-scale overt consideration of preaching

in the postmodern milieu was underway. John S. McClure identifies "conversation" as a

philosophical means to position preaching in a trajectory of continuity with historical

tradition while actively seeking to address problems with change.

> In homiletics, a revival of interest in the term "conversation" is likely to be predicated on the arrival of a new generation of ministers in many mainstream pulpits who have quit yearning nostalgically for either transcendental or foundational truths to preach. At the same time, they have grown weary of the radical subjectivities of Bergson and Bultmann (the truth of faith option). For better or worse, they have adopted a perspectival worldview and subscribe to a kind of epistemological pragmatism. For them, the truth of the gospel is, in the first place, paradigm/community/context-dependent. It can only be known by discussing, living, and practicing the Christian faith within a particular tradition, in a particular place, at a particular time.[55]

What is evident in the "new generation of ministers" is a ready adaptation to the

subjective modes of postmodern perspective. Rather than a transcendental truth with a

claim of universal authority that must be statically accepted or rejected there is a

readiness to immerse truth into the dynamic reality of subjective contextual

interpretation. The faithfulness of such an approach is a confidence that the truth of the

gospel will emerge valid under these circumstances, and by contrast any element that

may seem threatened by such subjectivity is evidence not of the gospel, but of some

additional context imposed upon it.

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[55] John S. McClure, "Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues" *Homiletic* 22, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 1, 1-13.

McClure goes on to say, "If we take seriously the need for a more open or 'unlimited' conversation, then we must consider ways that preaching can engage other religions and other subcultures in which the church is inextricably embedded."[56] In a similar response Ronald J. Allen applies to the conversation model of preaching what he calls "vectors in the postmodern irruption."[57] These are actually common themes of literary and philosophical postmodernism including interpretation, deconstruction, transgression, pluralism, and apologetic. Each of these he articulates then demonstrates how preaching may embrace the perspective and rather than being weakened in effect, preaching actually becomes strengthened, deepened, and broadened in its influence. The purpose here is not to elaborate on each example, but to illustrate the open-handed response of "conversation" in the postmodern culture of 21st century America. In summary Allen states,

> In the midst of the pluralism and relativism of postmodern culture, the preacher needs to commend the trustworthiness of Christian stories without disrespecting the stories of Others. The preacher needs to help the congregation have a good sense of what they can trust from God, the gospel, and Christian community. Otherwise, their confidence may erode. In today's culture, people can check out of the church more easily than they check out of a motel. Without a sense of the trustworthiness of the Christian vision, they have no reason to remain within the Christian household.[58]

The notion of "conversation" with a world that has dramatically shifted is a means to understand the emerging effort to re-engage the culture with a gospel that is resilient enough to hold its own alongside and in the language of competing views. The gospel as contextualized in the propositional language of earlier centuries and bound by modern

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[56] Ibid., 2.

[57] Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching and Postmodernism", 35.

[58] Ibid., 47-48.

assumptions may not be wrong or incorrect in its statements, merely marginalized without audience because it has failed to discover new expression in an advanced evolution of culture. However, when considered and reconstructed "in the language of the receptor culture," rather than despair, great hope is inspired for evangelistic preaching to gain a renewed effectiveness corresponding to the culture of the present day.

Contrary to the modern preoccupation with orderly outlines of proposition and carefully reasoned argument, there is a postmodern emergence of more affective elements employed to communicate the gospel. Elements such as narrative story, artistic composition, sensory perception, participatory interaction, and social action increasingly comprise the content of evangelistic preaching. The benefit derived by such elements is greater persuasion either directly as means to affective response, or indirectly by fostering a more engaging presentation.

PART TWO:

THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL PREACHING

Evangelistic preaching in postmodern culture will reflect a shift from patterns that were well-established during the modern era. Due to Christianity's marginalization in the mainstream culture, familiarity with the Bible can no longer be assumed. Even when the Bible is introduced the unbelieving culture does not ordinarily recognize any inherent authority of scripture on its own merits. It becomes necessary with evangelistic preaching to establish a starting point of common agreement and persuasive authority in some resource apart from the Bible itself. Fortunately, this is a practice that is demonstrated in the Bible itself. However, a modern definition of biblical preaching is more restricted, resulting in a critical attitude toward practices emerging in postmodern evangelism. A thorough consideration reveals that emerging approaches to evangelism are often more biblical than modern approaches, even though the latter may appear better grounded in Scripture.

Preaching the gospel persuasively in postmodern American Evangelicalism will require that it be set in a proper context with biblical and theological tradition. Up until this point much of what has been said is in reference to historical perspective. The case being made is not one of departure from historical and traditional Christianity; rather it is in continuity with the centuries of foundation that has been laid. Foremost in this continuity is the regard for preaching from a biblical perspective.

The Bible is central to Christianity because it is regarded as revelation; it uniquely contains the word of God and is therefore indispensable. Even when it is conceivable that theological discussion is engaged independent of the Bible, there remains the inextricable influence of the Bible upon Christian perspective, whether directly or indirectly. Therefore it is imperative to establish a hermeneutical framework for biblical preaching in order to maintain a theological consistency.

As postmodern culture increasingly marginalizes familiarity with Christianity, innovative approaches are required to engage listeners for evangelistic preaching. A common criticism of postmodern contextualization is that it strays so far toward accommodation that it loses a distinctly Christian character. Therefore, it becomes all the more essential that the present consideration be well grounded in a biblical and theological framework that maintains continuity with historical Christianity. Validation that preaching is in fact thoroughly Christian and possesses a God-ordained status rests in the timeless authority of the Bible. A theology of preaching necessitates biblical regard. Haddon Robinson presses even further indicating a mandatory status of biblical consideration in order for preaching to be considered Christian.

> Those in the pulpit face the pressing temptation to deliver some message other than that of the Scriptures—a political system (either right-wing or left-wing), a theory of economics, a new religious philosophy, old religious slogans, or a trend in psychology. Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.
> God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which he addresses individuals today.[59]

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[59] Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker,1980) , 20.

The idea captured with the phrase "preach the Scriptures" or what is here referred to as "biblical preaching" is not as simply defined as it may seem in Haddon Robinson's words. Many claims can be made for biblical preaching, but the variety of what is meant by biblical preaching is vast.

This chapter will establish the biblical imperative for evangelistic preaching, featuring the necessity of engaging listeners. It will make a clear distinction between evangelistic proclamation and other forms of preaching, with a consideration for how these functions have operated in the modern era. A case will be made to correct a commonly truncated understanding of the gospel as an isolated nucleus of information separate from the contexts to which it is carried. Additionally, disparities between biblical evangelism and modern evangelism will be identified. The initiative to engage listeners is prominent both in the content and forms revealed in Scripture.

The Meaning of "Biblical" as Content and Form

The modern period along with its defining characteristics is amalgamated with Christianity and particularly the birth and rise of Protestantism. The Protestant Reformation and its continuing affect upon Christianity are deeply embedded in an elevated regard for the Bible, in part growing from increasing literacy of the general populace. In the popular Protestantism of the modern era the content of the Bible was granted authoritative validity in itself, often regardless of context, form, or application. Emerging approaches within American evangelicalism seek to apply corrective measures

in order to regain a more holistic understanding of the Bible, as well as the gospel and

Christianity, particularly in regards to evangelistic preaching.

The mantra of the reformers—*sola scriptura*, scripture alone—launched a regard

for the Bible that, together with growing concerns over the authority of the Catholic

church, eclipsed other elements of religious tradition among protestant groups. Jaroslav

Pelikan acknowledges this preoccupation with the Bible to the exclusion of all else.

> According to the widely circulated *Religion of Protestants a Safe Way to Salvation*, published in 1638 by William Chillingworth, who had been a convert from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism but returned to the Church of England, "the Bible only is the religion of Protestants." In some Protestant churches the pulpit stands above the altar—or, to call it by the proper term, *communion table*, an "altar" being strictly speaking only a place for sacrifice, which the Sacrament definitely is not for Protestant churches. In many of them, moreover, there is a prominently displayed Bible (usually open, to symbolize the immediate connection between believer and the word of God) in the place where the reserved Host of the Eucharist would be expected to repose in a Roman Catholic church. Not surprisingly, then, the second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic church of 1962-65 could speak with a mixture of genuine admiration and ever-so-gentle reproof about a "love and reverence, almost a cult, for Holy Scripture" among the "separated Protestant brethren."[60]

In the modern era there was in Western civilization such a wide-scale cultural

awareness of the Christian faith that familiarity with the Bible and the gospel message

could be presumed. As a result, sermons commonly quoted the Bible with an assumed

knowledge and regard for its inherent authority on the part of listeners. The emergence

of biblical criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gradually eroded public

confidence of Scripture. Directly and indirectly the result has been a diminishing

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[60] Jaroslave Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It? A Short History of the Scriptures* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 163.

cognizance of Christianity in recent decades so that familiarity with the content of the Bible among the general populace may no longer be assumed.

The postmodern cultural shift in America has given rise to emerging approaches to evangelistic preaching that are innovative, including for example, mime, back-lighted sand art set to music, and video vignettes to name a few. Some of these approaches have been criticized as merely accommodation because they fail to conform to modern criteria for preaching. However, careful consideration reveals that often the innovative approaches to engage listeners are actually more biblical than typical modern approaches. The academic character of the modern era has resulted in a popular confusion of the term "biblical" as a description of preaching. In popular use the term has often referred to the mere presence of biblical content itself contained in the message preached. However, a strong case may be made that form is as significant as, if not more significant than content for effective and engaging evangelistic preaching.

The notion that preaching is "biblical" provides theological assurance in the tension between valid contextualization and what is merely accommodation, often to a fault. However, the term "biblical" has a variety of meanings, thus in order to maintain a cohesive logic it is imperative to identify in which of three senses biblical preaching is understood. Fred Craddock has rightly said, "whoever goes to the Bible in search of *what* to preach but does not linger long enough to learn *how* to preach has left its pages much too soon."[61] When reference is made to biblical preaching, the idea includes both the biblical content, which makes up the material of the message, and the form and style of the message as it corresponds to examples in the Bible. Additionally, there is a sense

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[61] Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 16.

of "biblical preaching" that arises from what the Bible itself says about the act of preaching. The act of preaching is mentioned throughout the Bible (particularly in the New Testament), and at times with instructional intent about the manner of preaching. Collectively there may be established a doctrine of preaching based in the Bible.

Voices within the Christian sub-culture often reduce "biblical preaching" to a preferred definition as though "biblical preaching" were only a single "true" form. However, the variety of forms displayed in the Bible itself—much less inferences about preaching, and without the distinction of "evangelistic" preaching—shows the immense latitude validated, usually relative to circumstance. The character of biblical preaching being adjusted commensurate with circumstance is an indicator, even if indirectly, of the necessity of engagement for the sake of effectiveness, whether intentional or intuitively. Any direction to subscribe to a particular "form" for preaching regardless of circumstantial engagement cannot exclusively be called "biblical" preaching.

When considering specifically the case of evangelistic preaching the case is even stronger. What is implied is that, when an audience is made up of those who are already believers, there is an engagement on the part of the audience that is assumed. The initiative for engagement, which should always be crucial in all preaching, is however more crucial when preaching to persuade unbelievers. In the Bible, apostolic preaching, whether aligned toward Jews or Gentiles, is readily identified by the relevance to the circumstance being engaged, where both form and content reflect that relevance.

In one of the early examples of Christian evangelism, as recorded in Acts 2:14-41, Peter addressed a gathering in Jerusalem made up predominantly of Jews who already had familiarity with the content of the Hebrew Scriptures. His message accordingly cited

examples from the Old Testament, as well as quoted several verses of Scripture verbatim.

An indication that the content and form of his preaching combined to engage listeners for

effective evangelism is found in Acts 2: 40-41, "With many other words he warned them;

and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' Those who

accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their

number that day."

By contrast, an example of preaching in a different context is found in Acts

17:18-34 where Paul addressed a meeting of the Aeropagus in Athens. The listeners on

this occasion included Jews and God-fearing Greeks, along with Epicurean and Stoic

philosophers. His address acknowledges that the listeners were "very religious," but

these listeners were more familiar with pagan spiritual metaphysics than with the Old

Testament Scriptures. Accordingly Paul does not quote nor refer to any content from the

Old Testament. However, he cites an Athenian civic inscription (17:23) and the poets of

that culture (17:28). Consequently, a similar indication is given that the content and form

of his preaching combined to engage listeners for effective evangelism, "Some of the

people became followers of Paul and believed." (Acts 17:34a).

Similarly, much of the preaching by Jesus recorded in the Gospels uses content

drawn from stories, metaphors in nature and agriculture, and common human

experiences. At other times the words of Jesus refer to scripture, but as much for

illustration as for modern-style exegesis. It may be presumptuous to assert that the

intentional purpose behind such usage was in order to engage listeners; however, several

summary statements indicate that relevant style engaging the interest and response of

listeners mattered as much as the content of the message to heighten the persuasive

impact. Such statements include the following: "the large crowd listened to him with delight" in Mark 12:37b; and "the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" in Matthew 7:28-29.

These contrasting examples give perspective on biblical preaching. It is not accurate to say that either one is more pertinent to evangelistic preaching in the twenty-first century postmodern American context—although the culture may be less uniformly religious it is also more generally educated, so the degree of familiarity with Judeo-Christian literature is not necessarily an assumption that can be made. Furthermore, the degree of familiarity with any particular content, biblical or otherwise, is less relevant than whether or not the content used possess authoritative persuasion in the perspective of the listeners. What is significant is that the utilization of content be relevant to the listeners—content that is familiar and content that holds authority to persuade.

This seems to be the encouragement in Colossians 4:5-6 for all evangelistic communication, much less preaching, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." The content of sermon material may or may not be from the Bible, but preaching that is biblical will always include content designed to engage listeners. Examples of preaching in the Bible itself demonstrate that the purpose of preaching is the impact upon people much more than perpetuating a body of correct information.

To consider content apart from form will result in misunderstanding. This is emphasized by Fred Craddock when he says, "…analyze a parable to ascertain its meaning, dispense with the parabolic form, state its message as a proposition, and you

have altered not just the how but also the what. Another case in point is the gospel. A gospel is a form as well as a message…"[62] According to Craddock the form of biblical material is essential to its usage in preaching; utilizing biblical content apart from its original form risks neutralizing its "biblicity."

The typical modes of communicating information in the modern era leaned in favor of precise, specific, technical language. However, communication, especially persuasive communication as in evangelistic preaching, is far more prone to involve what C. S. Lewis calls "ordinary language and even poetic language."[63] Zack Eswine has summarized Lewis' concept well.

> C. S. Lewis says there are at least three kinds of language used in religion. The first is what Lewis called *scientific* or what preachers might call *systematic* or *doctrinal*. The language is precise and technical. "It is 13 degrees outside" serves as an example. The second language use is what Lewis called *ordinary*: "It is cold outside." *Poetic* language serves as Lewis's third category: "Ah! The chill of the air is likely to numb an owl with all its feathers." Each kind of language is necessary and functions with purpose.[64]

Ironically, ordinary language and poetic language are the more common types of communication that mark much of the biblical material. Often these styles in communicating do not readily conform to the precise structure of technical language. In such cases modern communication, using technical language, has actually erred toward less biblical character, even though the content may be thoroughly immersed in biblical material.

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[62] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 9.

[63] See C. S. Lewis, "The Language of Religion" in *The Seeing Eye* (1967; repr., New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 171-188.

[64] Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 107

An example from the modern era, perhaps reflecting the rising prominence of academic institutions and the prevailing educational model, is a popular approach to preaching that is biblical in content, but not form. The approach commonly referred to as "verse-by-verse" preaching has been often mistakenly deemed as more "biblical" than other forms of preaching. At one level the mistakenness of this notion is due to the distinction which follows in the next section between "preaching" as defined under *kerygma* (proclamation) and "teaching" as defined by *didache* (instruction). Further, efforts to "preach" verse-by-verse often fail even to meet the characteristics of teaching, much less preaching. Rather, they devolve to merely academic analysis, sounding like the reading of a biblical reference commentary. Not to be confused with expository preaching, this approach presents syntax from biblical languages, parsing of words, and somewhat related historical background information as ends in themselves, comprising segments of material more than meaning or persuasion for life transformation. As such, the practice is somewhat biblical, valid, helpful, and even worthy of acclaim, but should not be inadvertently assumed to be evidence of biblical preaching, much less engaging for nonbelievers. More will be said regarding the distinctive of proclamation, and particularly missional proclamation, in the section that follows; however, here this consideration provides an example for demonstrating the significance of form as well as the range of inference implied with the term "biblical."

In the case of the verse-by-verse strategy of communication the *content* of the communication is thoroughly biblical; however, as a *form* of presentation there is no place in the Bible itself where such a tactic is used. For that matter, prior to the modern era, it would have been unlikely that preaching would include analysis of a single verse

or part of a verse; such consideration was reserved for academic exegesis. The case may be made that, with the canonization of the New Testament, a character of scriptural literature was introduced that is more technical, lending itself to verse-by-verse analysis, rather than the longer narrative or poetic styles of the Old Testament, which would have been the "biblical" reference for any communication represented in the Bible itself. However, even if such a view is taken, the analytical preaching remains a later contextualized overlay upon the Bible and upon communication based on the Bible than what is actually in and of itself, the Bible. This is precisely the distinction that is being made in order to substantiate the validity of postmodern contextualization: first, to rescue innovative communication strategies from the charge that contextualization has extended to accommodation, leveled against it by a perspective that is itself an accommodating contextualization of a later development; second, to reinforce the flexibility, from the Bible itself, that allows form to be as much if not more significant than content in order to merit the classification of "biblical."

There are three distinct senses captured in the words "*biblical* preaching" that illustrate the degree to which *content* is involved. First, the term biblical preaching is often used to refer to sermons crafted from the passages and themes of the Bible, elsewhere called textual sermons. In this sense the topic of the sermon is a consideration of the Bible in and of itself. This is the strictest sense and least needs qualification as biblical preaching, or "expository" preaching as it is popularly called, though this word

requires further clarification. Haddon Robinson has rightfully said, "not all expository preaching necessarily qualifies as either *expository* or *preaching*."[65]

Robinson's indication that there is meaning deeper than just the words themselves is the case with his earlier insistence of "preach the scriptures." Biblical preaching includes meaning that extends deeper than simply using the texts of the Bible as material. To preach the scriptures is to "proclaim the whole counsel of God" as Paul declares in Acts 20:27. By his own declaration in Acts 20:20 Paul states, "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you," indicating the breadth of subject material implied with biblical preaching. A strict definition of textual exposition may leave issues unaddressed for lack of a specific scripture that speaks directly to the topic. It is often noted that the Bible does not directly mention the doctrine of the Trinity, and yet the vast majority of preachers and teachers who hold to it would never describe it as an unbiblical doctrine. Likewise, there are issues Scripture does not specifically address upon which the church should not keep silent, such as the ethics of gene splicing, abortion, and environmental stewardship. Preaching the scriptures, includes sermons that may not be textually derived, but still consist of biblical preaching.

For example, a sermon against pornography (a thoroughly Christian topic for a message) serves as an example illustrating three distinct senses of biblical preaching. As a sermon topic it would not be regarded as biblical in this first sense, since there is no biblical passage that directly addresses the topic. In the case of a passage like Psalm 101:3, "I will refuse to look at anything vile and vulgar," the indirect inference would classify as the second sense below.

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[65] Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 21.

The second use of the term *biblical preaching* may refer to the actual use of material from the Bible—cross references, stories as illustrations, biblical themes—as the content of the message. For example in this way a sermon against pornography may be steeped in related scriptures (sensuality, lust, honorable thoughts) and regarded as biblical preaching. In this case what merits being classified as "biblical" is the relevance of biblical citations, not the mere presence or volume of content. The volume of biblical content as a determinant of whether or not preaching is biblical lacks logical validity, but is mentioned because of a common misunderstanding that is prevalent in many circles today. In one view, a message with many biblical quotations, including blatant proof-texts, is regarded as being "very biblical." The concerns with this method for preaching are whether or not the message conveyed is consistent with the citations used; and whether or not a message communicated apart from the actual citations of Scripture may yet be regarded as biblical. The questions beg for further definition of what nuance of the word biblical is being used, but it is accurate to declare a message as biblical without any use of scripture references. For example, a message may be built around the idea of "Prayer is an act of Faith." The concepts of prayer and of faith are not restricted only to the Bible, and much could be communicated on these topics without biblical citations, but that would not necessarily mean the message was unbiblical.

Therefore, three assertions may be maintained regarding biblical preaching under this second sense of meaning: 1) a message with no biblical reference is not automatically unbiblical, 2) a message with biblical references is not automatically biblical, and 3) a message is considered biblical for reasons other than presence or volume of scriptural citations.

Thirdly, there is a sense of "biblical preaching" wherein the form corresponds to the pattern of examples of sermons actually preached in the Bible—intact messages recorded as delivered by Jesus or Paul or Old Testament prophets, for example. Collectively, the valid characteristics of such preaching are grounds for practices that may be said to be biblical. For example, a sermon against pornography with no biblical reference at all may be regarded as biblical in form after the pattern of Paul in Acts 17, utilizing a material resource from contemporary culture that is regarded with persuasive authority, even though void of any biblical content. Biblical preaching in this sense refers to persuasive communication designed to influence listeners in spiritual matters, regardless of the material content used.

As the preaching ministry of twenty-first century American Evangelicalism wrestles with the distance created by cultural marginalization, there are new approaches to evangelistic preaching that are emerging. Due to the unfamiliarity of listeners with the content of the Bible, much less regard for its authority, sermons may include few or no biblical references and quotations, especially when designed to engage unbelieving listeners. While this feature is at times criticized as accommodation to the point of being unbiblical, in actuality the forms of preaching in the Bible itself often reflect the same feature. Therefore, a theology of preaching for postmodern evangelism will recognize that sermons are deemed biblical not merely by content alone, but by forms that correspond with examples in Scripture, most notably using content that engages listeners.

The Preaching Distinctive of Missional Proclamation

Among all forms of Christian communication, preaching occupies a distinct

niche. That distinction is narrowed even further when, as in this dissertation, the focus is upon "evangelistic" preaching. While all manner of Christian communication has value and appropriate place, evangelism meets criteria of a specific definition. Further, for evangelistic preaching to be regarded as "effective," there is generally the result of unbelievers responding affirmatively to the message proclaimed.

In order to speak constructively about evangelistic preaching certain definitions must be applied. Words such as evangelism, preaching, biblical, effective, etc. do not have specific undiffused meeting, rather they are large platforms on which varied, even conflicting, ideas rest. Chapters 3 and 4 in this section not only explore the range of meaning implied in the terms and concepts as they are utilized in the larger consideration, but also identify the relevance these terms and concepts have for distinguishing evangelistic preaching from other preaching. The task of distinguishing evangelistic preaching in this chapter is twofold: to distinguish assumptions and to substantiate validity. First, it must distinguish the assumption of modern methodologies, often presumed to be biblical, from what are actually modern perspectives superimposed upon biblical thought. Secondly, it must substantiate the biblical and theological validity of postmodern contextualization, which because it is new or innovated, are at times suspect from the perspective of modern evaluation.

The word *preaching* can hold a range of meanings encompassing a wide variety of Christian communication, and it is important to differentiate what exactly is implied when using the word. First, it is necessary to separate the term *preaching* from among other similar forms of communication; and secondly, among categories of preaching to separate those designed for persuading nonbelievers and thus considered evangelistic

preaching. Conversely, it is helpful to distinguish evangelistic preaching from other forms of evangelism that do not constitute preaching.

A common diagram is composed of overlapping circles representing different spheres that may share some elements in common as well as other unshared elements. With the increased number of spheres represented there emerges a distinct subset that meets several criteria of each where they all overlap. Such a diagram would well illustrate the relationships between communication, preaching, instruction, evangelism, gathered assembly, oratory presentation, media presentation, listeners, readers, active participants, and classification of responses. The variety of concepts related to preaching is expressed by William Willimon,

> The New Testament speaks of "preaching" with a variety of words -- the act of proclamation (keryssein), the announcement of good news (euangelizesthai), conversing (homilien), witnessing (martyrein), teaching (didaskein), prophesying (propheteuein), and exhorting (parakelein).[66]

The variety of ideas and the overlapping inferences are due in part to the number of factors involved in Christian communication. The style, context, and format of communication may imply a certain idea. One speaker addressing a large audience with a prepared presentation is very different than a heartfelt spontaneous conversation between a small circle of friends, but both may or may not actually constitute preaching. The topic addressed in communication may indicate the assumptions made regarding listeners' spiritual status and whether or not criteria are met to classify preaching as evangelism. Whether those participating with the communication are already persuaded

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[66] William Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*. Horizons in Theology Series. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 40.

believers or decidedly unconvinced may determine the character of the presentation.
Evangelism, prophecy, and exhortation though distinct from one another may all be
regarded as preaching.

A variety of related terms inform the label "evangelistic preaching." Before
creating a working definition of missional proclamation it is helpful to address several
supporting ideas. Each one is useful for sharpening distinctions as well as stating overtly
what may not necessarily be implied.

<div align="center">Communication</div>

Communication is a broad medium within which preaching and evangelism
occur, encompassing oral, written, and media presentation as well as personal interaction.
All preaching is communication, but not all communication is preaching. All verbal
presentation is communication, but communication well exceeds merely verbal
presentation. Some verbal presentation is spoken and some is written, not spoken. Some
preaching is verbal presentation, but not all preaching is verbal presentation. Verbal
preaching may be defined as presentation but should not be mistaken for only one-
speaker-to-gathered-audience presentation. Conversation between two people via email
is technically presentation. Conversation-level evangelism is the premise of Brian
McLaren's book, *A New Kind of Christian*, which is a depiction of evangelism that
occurs through emails exchanged between two people.[67] The remaining question is what
degree of "proclamation" is necessary in order for a presentation to be classified as

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[67] See Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey.* (San Frnacisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

"preaching?" With the advancement of technology preaching may be a video presentation on You Tube perhaps even with no words, just as certainly as preaching is a speaker with a microphone before an audience gathered in church on Sunday morning.

Furthermore, there is a range of experience that is implied with evangelism. One individual viewing imagery from an internet website that was created previously for other purposes, nonetheless may interpret spiritual meaning and open his or her heart toward God as a result. Alternatively, a listener to a gospel sermon in church, as a result, enriches new vocabulary for a presentation at work the next day. The latter case is verbal, communal, preaching, but not as clearly evangelism as the former case.

Thus when addressing evangelistic preaching it is necessary not to truncate the range of factors implied in the word *communication* or even *presentation*. However, with that qualifier stated, the purpose of this dissertation will be best served by drawing a focus on the preaching ministry within American evangelicalism which typically occurs in gathered assembly and most representatively as part of some worship service or other occasion and by an individual who has prepared a presentation as a message. The notion of message lends itself to greater openness for a variety of forms than does mere speaking alone. With the increased prevalence of technological media as well as dramatic arts the act of preaching is understood to encompass a variety of forms which comprise the delivery of the message. Robert Webber emphasizes these alternatives as he describes the innovative approaches of younger evangelicals.

> The recovery of imagination has led to a new emphasis among the younger
> evangelicals, *the resurgence of the arts.* The pragmatists reintroduced drama skits
> and the entertainment arts, but the younger evangelicals are returning to much
> greater appreciation and use of the classical arts….Art has to be understood not as
> mere illustration but in the greater context of the church, as it witnesses to the

kingdom of God and to the ultimate redemption of all things as set forth by Isaiah's vision of the new creation. Younger evangelicals appreciate art not as mere presentations of the gospel message but as visions of a transformed and redeemed world.[68]

In the modern era the word *sermon* evoked an image of one person speaking before a gathered group, usually following a propositional outline designed to assist the verbal format. As innovative approaches are emerging the sermon is likely to involve far more visual, tactile, or experiential elements. This shift is a reflection of the changes in culture and the efforts to engage listeners. By correlating preaching within the broader scope of all communication, which itself reflects postmodern shifts, the innovative approaches of postmodern preaching may be validated and contrasted assumptions clearly distinguished.

Message

The essential material of communication is message. Message consists of the meaning or understanding that is conveyed between a sender and a receiver. In section 5.1 of this dissertation attention will be given to the physiology of the human brain as it relates to communication; however, it is sufficient here to merely acknowledge that communication is reduced and clarified to fundamental units of meaning. The term *message* may equally refer to an individual unit of meaning in one person's brain as well as a large quantity of information combined into a body of understanding. Thus, when a phrase such as the "message of Christ" is used, or "the gospel message," it reflects a body of meaning that is intact apart from any particular communication of it.

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[68] Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 51.

The broad scope entailed with message is given further complexity by the way meaning occurs. A meaning sharply defined in the mind of the sender is encoded for communication, then conveyed as a message, then decoded by a receiver, and converted to meaning in the mind of a receiver that may be very similar to, as well as quite different from, the meaning intended. Therefore, message is always relative to the factors involved with communication.

Between the individual unit of meaning in one person's mind and the large scale body of understanding there is an intermediate understanding of message that best represents preaching. In this sense the message is a topic or subject of a given presentation and what is communicated on that topic. This definition of message includes the content that is presented as well as the structure and manner of how it is crafted into a presentation.

The flexible range of meaning incurred with messages communicated is what gives rise to the plurality of ideas under the category of preaching. In an effort to align the actual experience of meaning with the meaning intended various modes of communication seek to categorize messages into several types, including: prophecy, exhortation, blessing, testimony, and instruction. Of these, the one emphasized here is "proclamation." With all that has been said about communication, message, and gospel the specific application of preaching stressed here is proclamation. Literally, proclamation is announcement or declaration. Its purpose is to inform or make known what might previously be unknown or uncertain or only slightly familiar. Further, it carries a force of call, in the sense of expected response of compliance.

Thus, in times past when the royal edict of the king was sent out as a proclamation the intent was for the announcement to be heard and heeded by the subjects to whom it was addressed. Proclamation in one era would be the regally adorned herald of the king in the town square unfurling a parchment bearing the wax seal of the king's signet and in a loud voice verbally announcing a taxation upon all vendors using the town square for commerce. The same type of proclamation in a different era would be an IRS publication bearing instructions for completing an excise tax form available online in electronic format. Both are examples of proclamation from the governing authority to subjects with the same intent of communication and expectation of heeded compliance.

Proclamation is a declared announcement, but may carry a variety of tones. The examples above have a tone of command to them. Another example might have a tone of warning as in a severe weather alert broadcast over a news station. Another may have a tone of "invitation" as in a "buy one, get one free" advertisement. These examples illustrate how evangelistic preaching often reflects a variety of tone to the message, but is always marked by the character of proclamation; an informed announcement declaring news with the appeal for response.

Though not an authorized checklist for determining if a communication may be classified as "proclamation," these examples reveal the elements typically involved with evangelistic preaching, whether with a speaker before a crowd or an email between friends—more significant than the type of presentation or the setting in which it occurs is the message that is presented and it's orientation toward response from the recipients of that message.

Two clarifications can be made regarding evangelistic preaching. First, there is a distinction between preaching and teaching. In the gospels, the two terms *preaching* and *teaching* are at times paired as though they are distinct activities (See Matthew 11:1; Acts 5:42). These two concepts are often merged, and not necessarily wrongfully so, but they have been referred to in tandem in scripture which raises a question about the difference between the two and the relationship they hold to one another. One might ask whether preaching is a subset within a larger context of teaching, or vice versa, or perhaps the two are overlapping yet distinct activities. Preaching in modern practice has encompassed these two distinct elements of historical Christian ministry, *kerygma* (proclamation) and *didache* (instruction). With the modern emphasis on reason, information, and education, it is understandable that the character of preaching in American evangelicalism has become overly instructional, with instruction at times nearly eclipsing proclamation. This practice has inadvertently weakened evangelistic efforts, not because instruction is ineffective at persuading unbelievers, but because as regarded by the unbelieving public the marginalization of Christianity in the culture has rendered such consideration merely the particular curiosity of those already convinced. Both may be instrumental as effective means of evangelism, designed and directed for those not already convinced. However, preaching designed as instruction may be based on assumptions directed for those already convinced and thus regarded as preaching, but not necessarily evangelistic preaching.

A second distinction is between all preaching generally (which may include teaching, as instructional proclamation) and evangelistic preaching specifically. Preaching is definitively proclamation, but not all proclamation has the intent and purpose of persuading unbelievers to respond and align with the gospel of Christ.

Among terms used it is helpful to use *missional* as referring to what is more commonly called evangelistic. A popular use of the term *evangelistic* may simply mean an emphatic style, whereas missional clearly carries the idea of being directed toward the Christian mission of persuading nonbelievers toward faith in Christ.

In the late twentieth century it became common in American evangelicalism to develop sermons keeping the character of the audience in mind. The critical distinction was between "believers" and "seekers." This approach addressed the evident problem facing evangelism by correcting the inadvertent assumption made upon the general public of a pre-existing awareness of the Christian message. However, as a tenet of biblical preaching a "seeker-driven" approach is only latent in scripture. There is no indication of Jesus sitting to teach the multitudes and first determining whether or not the crowd was predominantly made up of believers or seekers. In the world of first century Palestine the distinction would have more likely been termed "Jews and Gentiles;" however, Jesus' penchant for widely inclusive public gatherings, which incidentally earned him the reputation of "friends with sinners," may demonstrate his preference to simply address all listeners, not as insiders and outsiders, but simply as humans. An overlapping subset of intersection between the two classifications of audience can be conceived where preaching is designed and directed for both believer and unbeliever with effectiveness, though this approach seems susceptible to presumption. Precisely because of the cultural shifts from the modern period to the postmodern period, the distinction between believer and unbeliever is helpful or even necessary to aid evangelistic preaching. At the least the distinction becomes the means to emphasize the assumptions underlying the malaise affecting evangelism in the transitional era between modern and postmodern culture.

Thus it is practical, though not without exception, to distinguish proclamation from instruction and missional from didactic, resulting in a working definition of evangelistic preaching: communication, proclamatory in nature, designed to persuade unconvinced people to respond to the gospel. In light of the above discussion it is a conclusion of this dissertation that among all Christian communication, when the Bible refers to preaching, there are a variety of messages that are classified as proclamation, distinct from instruction or inspiration. Also, among all the preaching that is distinctly proclamation only a portion is purposefully missional. Missional proclamation is the particular focus of the present consideration. Furthermore, effectiveness as measured by response is cause for the emphasis upon engaging listeners, always, but especially with evangelistic preaching.

Contrasts Between Biblical and Modern Forms of Evangelistic Preaching

The previous section, *The Preaching Distinctive of Missional Proclamation*, regarding content and form alluded to the present distinction between modern and biblical. Modern forms of preaching have emerged as overwhelmingly deductive, outlined with an introduction, several points, and a conclusion, according to the design of Western structures of literature and presentation. Examples of preaching recorded in the Bible are much different in structure. The ancient and Eastern culture reflected in much of the Bible is far more narrative. Under the topic "Speaking Like the Bible" William Willimon says,

> Biblical preaching tends to be narrative rather than abstract, propositional, or theoretical because narrative is the typical biblical way of dealing with the truth

of a Trinitarian, incarnate God. There is something about story that is peculiarly suitable for the Bible's way with truth.[69]

Recalling from Part One that Western culture, and particularly American culture, emerged greatly interwoven with Christian influence there are assumptions that remain, even though the cultural basis supporting them has eroded for decades. William A. Dyrness says, "It sometimes is difficult to distinguish what is American from what is Christian."[70] The same could be said about the difficulty in distinguishing what is modern from what is biblical. Even as Christianity grows increasingly marginalized in mainstream culture, within the sphere of the Christian religion certain assumptions remain largely unchanged from what they were three-hundred, or four hundred, or five hundred years ago. In the modern era evangelistic preaching, consistent with the Enlightenment revolution of knowledge, became increasingly characterized by information and the deductive process. This coupled with the Protestant Reformation elevated theological precision, which in turn shaped preaching into more precisely defined articulation.

At present as new postmodern approaches are being explored, there is an entrenchment that reflects more of a modern tradition than biblical necessity. In fact, more careful consideration of what constitutes biblical preaching helps release the modern fist-hold on evangelistic preaching both by substantiating the ever-

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[69] Willimon, *Proclamation & Theology*, 47.

[70] Dyrness, William A., *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1989), 12-13.

contextualizing character of the gospel, and by exemplifying patterns and assumptions

that diverge from those prevalent in modern culture.

Addressing the difference between modern methods of preaching and that

demonstrated in the Bible itself Timothy Downs says, "Good, solid expositional sermons

get replaced by puppet shows and interpretive dance. To be fair, that *can* happen, but it

doesn't have to."[71] He then cites Eugene Peterson,

> We have such a fear of superstition and allegory that we squeezed all the
> imaginative stuff out of Scripture so we could be sure that it was just precise and
> accurate…We must always strike a balance between the two—clear, scriptural
> thinking communicated in a powerful and relevant style.[72]

The modern approach should not be mistakenly considered unbiblical. In itself it

reflects exactly what the biblical character of evangelistic preaching presents—namely

that evangelistic preaching should appeal to whatever convincing or persuasive influence

is regarded by those to whom it is addressed. If recipients of the message are persuaded

by the sentiments of the long established scriptures of Moses and the Prophets, as in the

example of Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2, then regular citations of Moses and the Prophets

ought to be utilized for their persuasive influence. If recipients regard the thought

systems of Greco-Roman philosophy, as with the example of Paul at Athens in Acts 17,

then reference to those thought systems ought to be utilized to communicate the gospel.

In the modern era, if recipients esteem highly the deductive rational process of the

scientific method, then carefully structured arguments ought to be utilized for

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[71] Downs, *Finding Common Ground,* 67.

[72] Ibid., 67 [Eugene Peterson, "Masters of Imagination," *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmands, 1997), 134.]

evangelistic preaching in that context. However, as culture shifts to embrace a much more narrative manner of engagement, then the style and substance of evangelistic preaching ought to reflect that shift.

On the contrary, the fact that an effective means of persuading recipients of the message was demonstrated in a particular era, does not make that means normative, nor effective, outside of that context. In the postmodern era, deductive reasoning remains a valid demonstration of persuasion; however, in itself alone, it very often does not hold the power to persuade as it did decades and centuries before. In fact, many of the time-honored practices evident in the Bible (such as story/narrative and poetic-musical) are enjoying greater effectiveness at gaining response among recipients of evangelistic preaching. Excellence in communication will be well served to heed principles of rhetoric, cohesive logic, outline, points, and sub-points—but these are not to be proscriptive, rather instrumental in aiding communication.

With forms of evangelistic preaching the challenge of distinguishing between what is biblical and what is merely a modern approach is that there are relatively few biblical examples, but there are an overwhelming range and variety of examples to draw from in the modern era. The task therefore is not to contrast the two in an either/or comparison; rather it is to recognize certain techniques as modern, not biblical, that may be supplemented, replaced, or dispensed with while still remaining true to biblical preaching so that in the postmodern context innovative effectiveness may be sought.

Perhaps the finest contribution the modern era has made to the historical development of evangelistic preaching is the use of propositional outline, where the structure of communication is oriented around logically cohesive statements, or "points"

as they are ordinarily called. As a practice this allows the preacher to build a logical sequence of thought and construct a convincing line of argument designed to persuade recipients of the message. Further developments in postmodern preaching would do well not to dispense with the credibility fostered by modern rationality.

However, in the postmodern era, due perhaps to the proliferation of information in the modern era, recipients are persuaded less on the basis of information alone arranged in outlines of convincing propositions. Regarding the sterile laboratory-like approach of Christian preaching, Tim Downs has said, "They are superbly prepared to answer questions that non-Christians quit asking two generations ago."[73] Persuasion in the postmodern era is more likely to be upon the basis of how knowledge is applied. Demonstrating a desirable end or outcome resulting from the information is more significant than the articulation of the information itself.

With evangelistic preaching the modern era found itself consumed with presenting the gospel along the lines of compiling evidence to substantiate the historicity of Jesus and the Bible or to validate the existence of the supernatural, or to defend against critiques from science. The approach toward evangelism in modern times was embodied in the popular title, *Evidence That Demand a Verdict*.[74] Often the flavor of evangelistic preaching seemed to "fight fire with fire" by drawing upon scientific discovery, or psychological explanations, or by citing statements from culturally accepted authorities. Thus, for example, a quote from Albert Einstein about God was considered a very convincing technique for persuading belief, never mind that the quote was drawn

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[73] Downs, *Finding Common Ground,* 99.

[74] McDowell, Josh.

completely out of context. Alternately, perhaps a scientific sounding inquiry into the dual properties of light would serve as an illustration of scriptural reference to light. These and other examples are indications less of biblical necessity, or even of modern efforts at engaging listeners, but more of simply modern style based in reason, information, and education.

The modern technique of crafting convincing arguments, as a means to persuade unbelievers to change their minds, is facing decreasing effectiveness in postmodern culture. Again, this is practice not wrong, but simply aims in the wrong direction. Timothy Downs notes the dissonance between modern evangelism and a changing culture when he says, "Christians today seem to have concluded that the vast majority of Americans are against us, and so we have adopted an adversarial style of communication that becomes a self fulfilling prophecy: We *believe* they are enemies; we *speak* to them as enemies; they *become* enemies."[75] He further cites Deborah Tannen who describes the "Argument Culture" in America,

> The argument culture urges us to approach the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done….
> The war on drugs, the war on cancer, the battle of the sexes, politicians' turf battles—in the argument culture, war metaphors pervade our talk and shape our thinking. Nearly everything is framed as a battle or game in which winning or losing is the main concern. These all have their uses and their place, but they are not the only way—and often not the best way—to understand and approach our world.[76]

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[75] Downs. *Finding Common Ground*. 41.

[76] Ibid. [Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp 3-4.]

In the postmodern approach these tactics have not suddenly become invalid or wrong, they simply suffer from a dated fatigue. Preaching persuasively now must show a connection between the informational evidence and what application it offers for some positive result to improve or contribute to the lives of hearers. In doing so, lessening logical argument in favor of more implicit narrative is a movement that is actually toward a more biblical style, though admittedly adrift from the dominant style of the modern era.

Re-aligning Modern Interpretation of the Gospel

The Modern era originated a "method of reason" that became the means, almost exclusively, to establish authority in order to convince or persuade believability. While the scientific method is accepted as normative within the modern era, it is distinct to the period. This is not to say that earlier periods did not reflect reason, but the method of reasoning in prior eras often included additional elements not considered logical by standards of modern methodology; the modern method of reason is more restrictive than earlier periods. This creates a strong tendency to "read-into" (and "read out of") biblical material a covertly modern perspective. In doing so the modern perspective of enlightened reason often commits a logical fallacy which C. S. Lewis refers to as "Chronological Snobbery."

> In the first place he made short work of what I have called my "chronological snobbery," the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited. You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also "a period," and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those

widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.[77]

The modern methodology elevated Aristotelian logic above allegory or patterns in nature or musical expressions; however there are indications at points in Scripture where these are put forward as valid methods for persuading or convincing. In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus points out the "birds of the air" and "the lilies of the field," and from those observations of nature declares theological conclusions about God's activity with humans. In 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 Paul proclaims a line of argument regarding gender roles expressed as though it were obviously convincing with what, to most modern readers, would be an unfamiliar path of logic. In these and other examples biblical logic and modern logic find frequent points of divergence.

Once the distinctions between modern and biblical methods of interpreting gospel are identified, a question is raised whether the chronologically later includes and supersedes the former. Or whether perhaps there is a deeper level of understanding whereby a later methodology had truncated a valid range of interpretation that, when considered even later, for example from a postmodern view, rediscovers what the former (biblical) view actually included. The static and rigid elements of the modern method of reason greatly strengthened authoritative means for theological discourse but may have inadvertently leaned toward being too restrictive, so that continued development forward in understanding must revert back to methods present in earlier eras.

One example especially pertinent to evangelistic preaching is the modern emphasis upon individual conversion. The sharp analysis of modern reason had reduced

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[77] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1956), 207-208.

evangelism to its most basic unit, but in doing so, truncated spheres of evangelism that are experientially and biblically validated. Evangelism emerging in postmodern culture is finding resurging awareness of communal conversion, sometimes identified as promoting social justice, that had been largely eclipsed in modern times by the emphasis on personal decision.

The modern (Western) interpretation of the gospel views conversion in terms of individual response. While not wrong, a deeper question is whether that is the only means of conversion, and if not whether it is the most effective approach toward conversion. This question is addressed by Leslie Newbigin's discussion of conversion within non-western cultural customs and traditions. Using an example from African missionary Ronald Wynne among the Hambukushu of Etasha in Botswana he notes,

> A decision for Christ would be a decision that put the whole of their shared life, their culture, into a new setting. The result was a profound change in the whole corporate life of the community. Wynne contrasts this with what happened in many parts of Africa where a religion of individual salvation had been taught, along with a wholesale rejection and condemnation of traditional culture. The result has been, as he says, a superficial Christianity with no deep roots, and then—later—a reaction to an uncritical and sentimental attachment to everything in the discarded culture.
> This raises, it seems to me, sharp question for us in the old Western Christendom. The very way in which we raise the question, with the dichotomizing of gospel and culture, reveals the dualism in our thinking; a purely individualistic Christianity which reflects the individualism of our culture with its enthronement of the autonomous human reason as the judge of all things has to face—as though it were a separate question from conversion—the matter of relating gospel to culture.[78]

Conversion as a collective experience is substantiated in Scripture. For example in Acts 16 the account of a jailer coming to belief in Christ states in verse 33, "at that

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[78] Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, 189.

hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and

all his family were baptized."   While a modern definition of "becoming Christian"

emphasizes the place of individual response, biblical example incorporates a broader

definition. Again, this is not to indicate that the contributions of the modern era are

wrong, more that they often define so sharply as to limit or truncate biblically legitimate

understandings. Likewise, in postmodern culture there often is a character of logic,

expression, and reality that shares greater similarity with ancient modes than with modern

empirical method.

       Once the distinctly modern character is identified there are then other questions

that must be addressed, or what Leslie Newbigin calls the "next move."

> If this is the true diagnosis of our situation, what is the next move? If the
> gospel is always and everywhere culturally embodied—in a particular language
> and particular life-style, how can it be possible for the gospel to have a critical
> relation to culture? To be specific, can we who are both Christian believers and
> also products of this collapsing Western post-Enlightenment culture, can we find
> a stance from which we can criticize our own culture?[79]

A theology of preaching requires the ability, or what Newbigin calls a "stance," to

differentiate between modern cultural embodiments and the infinitely translatable

character of the gospel. Such a stance acknowledges the character of biblical texts to

have the same translatability in light of unfolding realities. Next moves, as Newbigin

defines them, grant new interpretation to timeless truths of scripture that critique the

limitations placed by a strictly modern interpretation, as well as introduce, or re-introduce

as the case may be, ancient understanding that emerges with new energy for postmodern

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[79] Ibid., 191.

expression. For this task, it is helpful to turn now to theological perspectives shaping

such perspectives.

CHAPTER 4

EMERGING THEOLOGY FOR EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

Evangelistic preaching requires engaging the interest of listeners with a compelling message that results in a determined change of heart leading to greater alignment with the Christian faith. The theology of preaching, including evangelism, is an articulation of what is involved in that process, including answers to questions why and how preaching is done; and how such efforts interact with shifting culture; and how these efforts change relative to current cultural trends. A theology of preaching developed and refined by the modern era will likely prove insufficient for addressing issues particular with listeners at home in postmodern culture. Therefore new theological energies are required to re-develop and further refine more thorough understanding of issues not addressed under modern thought.

Reflective of its enormous cultural upheaval, the twenty-first century is also a time of theological expansion and elasticity. As new perspectives are gained in an ever evolving world, time-honored theological constructs are stretched, perhaps strained, to assimilate or embrace new realities. Continued effectiveness for evangelistic preaching will require vigorous reflection about how eternal realities find new expression in the ideas and language of postmodern thought, and for distinguishing modern developments within longer theological trajectories. A theology of evangelistic preaching in

postmodern culture must differentiate anew between the eternal message being preached and the cultural perceptions being engaged.

Engaging listeners may seem more aligned with sociological concerns than with theological reflection; however, the need for a theology of preaching is expressed by William Willimon who declares, "if there is anything wrong with preaching as we know it today, what's wrong is theological."[80] Clyde Fant adds, "The divorce between theology and practical homiletics is a primary reason for the parish minister's ongoing frustrations with preaching."[81] The transitional state in which American evangelicalism now finds itself fosters a malaise for the preaching ministry of the church which presses back to the underlying purposes for preaching. Regarding the theology of preaching, Fred Craddock has said,

> Having a theology of preaching…is not to be understood as urging that one preach theology. Preaching theology could be offering in sermon form small pieces of the stuff of belief, with or without the authorization of biblical texts. Whatever merit there may be in such an exercise, it is not a theology of preaching because it leaves unexamined and unclear what one is doing what one preaches and in what way preaching relates to revelation.[82]

A theology of preaching is not as concerned with the content questions of what is preached as with the conduct questions of why and how preaching is done. A theology of *evangelistic* preaching in particular is further concerned with soteriological elements of spiritual response and spiritual effect. In this dissertation the case is being made for the necessity of engaging listeners as a prerequisite for persuasion. This chapter aims to validate and substantiate that necessity from within a theological perspective.

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[80] Willimon, *Proclamation & Theology*, 3.

[81] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, xi.

[82] Craddock, *Preaching,* 51

The Continued Preeminence of Preaching for Evangelism

The Christian faith has proceeded historically upon the conviction that God speaks primarily through his prophets and preachers (as opposed to the occasional wind storm, voice from heaven, donkey or burning bush). There is a spiritual power from God that is imbued in what Paul terms the "folly" of preaching in 1 Corinthians 1:23. By this manner, of humans speaking on God's behalf, centuries of effective evangelism has been propagated. While it may be a sign of fervently devotion to assert that the such progress will continue, there is credibility in presenting a theological perspective upon which such a claim is based.

Inherent within Christian faith is the mandate for expansion, or the propagation of the faith via believers persuading unbelievers in the process of evangelism. Among the means to accomplish that mandate, preaching has stood preeminent by virtue of its biblical sanction, its historical consistency, and its theological merit. These are the same priorities which indicate the viable continuance of preaching as the primary means of evangelism in the future.

Biblical Sanction

Preaching as a general category of practical theology enjoys an extremely strong biblical sanction. As the postmodern era unfolds it is with a dramatic reinterpretation of modern constructs in the thoughts and language of emerging culture. Likewise, in theology a similar reinterpretation may be seen. The significant element, though, in emerging theology is the continued place which Scripture holds. In every period, there are theological camps that exist independent of the Bible, and in all theological camps

there are ingredients that exist independent of Scripture, but valid theological

consideration maintains regard for the Bible as a foundational reference for claims made.

The thorough regard for the scriptures in preaching is described by William

Willimon.

> Although individual preachers may have various theologies of scriptural
> inspiration depending upon their church tradition, their own dealings with
> Scripture, and their biases, all preachers generally begin with the assumption that
> the Bible is a gift of God that uniquely illuminates human life in the present and
> that uniquely, indispensably speaks the promises of God and the truth that is God
> in Jesus Christ.[83]

The biblical sanction for preaching goes well beyond the popularity the Bible holds

among preachers; much of the force of Scripture lies in its impact upon listeners.

Addressing the impact of the Bible in preaching, Clyde Fant says,

> When the preacher recognizes the genuine human involvement in every line of
> Scripture, and when he realizes that what people care about and need, at the
> deepest level of reality, is what the Bible talks about, then his preaching will
> bridge the psychological distance between the historical word and the
> contemporary word.[84]

Even with the marginalization of Christian religion in Western culture, there continues to

be a fascination and robust regard for the Bible and its unique ability to address human

needs.

Historical Consistency

Evangelism is not completely dependent upon preaching, but historically,

preaching has been the primary method for advancement of the Christian faith. Even

when political coercion has been highly instrumental, though perhaps regrettable, in the

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[83] Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 39.

[84] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 93.

expansion of the faith—as following the conversion of Constantine or during the Crusades or with the Conquistadors—preaching has provided the articulation of the message for persuading conversion. During historical periods of awakening and revival in America, evangelism has occurred in response to preaching. William Dyrness cites Perry Miller in a summary of the Puritan period and the influence of preachers, "Miller in fact believes it was in this tradition of preaching, rather than in reaction to Deism and the Enlightenment, that the roots of the Second Great Awakening lay."[85]

Further, among various Christian religious traditions, the distinct scope of American evangelicalism, more so than Roman Catholicsm and some non-western traditions, centers on the preaching ministry of the church, and especially so for evangelistic preaching. The preaching ministry in American evangelicalism includes church services as well as mass evangelism, whether in crusade style events or technologically; however the context at this point is less significant than the methodology of preaching, wherein human presentation of sermons intending to generate response has resulted in the advancement of Christianity.

<div align="center">Theological Merit</div>

The theological preeminence of preaching rests in the character of God as one who speaks. At the creation of the universe, through the biblical record of his dealings with humanity, and in the unfolding history of the Christian religion God is revealed as self-expressing, always with voice and word. The unique blending of both human and divine in preaching is described by William Willimon.

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[85] Dyrness,, *How Does America Hear the Gospel*, 68.

Preaching is a theological act, our attempt to do business with a God who speaks. It is also a theological act in that a sermon is God's attempt to do business with us through words. Most speeches that we hear require a host of skills, insights, and gifts to make them work. I have just listened to a speech by a man who was attempting to sell me a new car. His speech was quite effective because of his skillful arrangement of his argument, his apt use of the English language, and his physical presentation. Preaching at times may use all of these rhetorical devices and use them well. But none of these devices is at the heart of what preaching is up to. At the heart of preaching is either a God who speaks, and who speaks now, in the sermon, or preaching is silly.[86]

Theological Tensions Between Timeless Gospel and Contextualization

The marginalization of Christianity in postmodern culture raises the question of whether or not the gospel and evangelistic preaching likewise has grown increasingly sidelined. However, there is an emerging awareness of expressing the timeless message of the gospel using concepts of postmodern thought and culture. As changes in culture redefine modern notions of truth, Christian theology must be articulated in the language of the new context.

Following the Medieval period, in the new language of the modern era, theological discourse adopted the constructs of reason and absolutes, which were growing increasingly common in the culture of the day, to express the Christian gospel. In similar fashion, the postmodern era now demands that theological discourse embrace the thoughts and language of a new context in order to express anew the timeless gospel of Christ. Pluralism and diversity are hallmarks of postmodern perspective. Consequently, theological discourse, much less evangelistic preaching, will be challenged to articulate

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[86] Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 2.

the Christian message apart from the language of absolutes and propositions reflective of

the modern period, and the assumption that all persons everywhere agree with these.

Previously reference was made to John S. McClure and Ronald J. Allen[87]

regarding the merits of "conversation" as philosophical means to position preaching in a

trajectory of continuity both with historical tradition and theological progression to

maintain a defined message in a context of pluralist ideas. Lesslie Newbiggin introduces

Peter Berger's idea of "plausibility structures" as a framework for understanding the

philosophical conversation among the diversity of pluralistic cultures.

> The sociology of knowledge has taught us to recognize the fact, which is obvious once it is stated, that in every human society there is what Peter Berger calls a "plausibility structure," a structure of assumptions and practices which determine what beliefs are plausible and what are not. It is easier to see the working of the plausibility structure in a culture of a different time or place than it is to recognize it in one's own.[88]

To illustrate the workings of plausibility structures between different times and

places, Newbigin contrasts the biblical tradition he embraces as a Christian with the

tradition of rationality in which he is immersed as a member of British society. The

particular contrast he expresses represents much of what is being said here about the

assumptions of the gospel as opposed to assumptions of a distinctly modern construct. In

the contrast, Newbigin applies the term "other tradition," or "external," to the plausibility

structure of modern culture.

> I am all the time living in, or at least sharing my life with, those who live in the other tradition. What they call self-evident truths are not self-evident to me, and vice versa. When they speak of reason they mean what is reasonable within their plausibility structure. I do not live in that plausibility, but I know what it feels

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[87] See pages 41-43 above.

[88] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 53.

like to live in it. Within my own mind there is a continuing dialogue between the two. Insofar as my own participation in the Christian tradition is healthy and vigorous, both in thought and in practice, I shall be equipped for the external dialogue with the other tradition.[89]

Facing the pluralistic culture of postmodern society, a similar dialogue, or conversation, is required to communicate the gospel in a plausibility structure that does not hold the assumptions of biblical tradition, or necessarily, modern tradition. Instead of absolute statements, which must be accepted or denied, the message is proposed in a suspended state of consideration in order to bolster its plausibility. While maintaining respect for divergent viewpoints, this approach allows the Christian message to gain a hearing at all, as opposed to being dismissed for irrelevance or arrogance.

Fortunately, these are not new challenges for the gospel; the world of the first few centuries presented a similar context for the fledgling Christian gospel. The difference is that, in that era, Christianity had not previously grown accustomed to wide-scale acceptance as today. It was a given assumption that the Christian voice would have to earn its own place in the cultural conversation by engaging the culture on terms defined by the culture. The same is true at the present time; however, made more difficult by the memory of a time when the Christian voice spoke with an inherent cultural authority. Forces within American evangelicalism yearn nostalgically for a return to the prominence Christianity once held in the mainstream culture of the Western world. Brian McLaren candidly describes the nostalgic yearning, often experienced, as a throwback to modern times when he describes the simplistic absolute view of the Bible.

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[89] Ibid, 65.

True, I grew up being taught that the Bible was an answer book, supplying exactly the kind of information modern, Western, moderately educated people want from a phone book, encyclopedia, or legal constitution. We want to know exactly when the earth was created (4004 B.C. or thereabouts) and how (instantaneously, during six 24-hour periods), along with when it will end. (Back in the 1960s, we "knew" the Bible taught that the world would end within about 25 years…oops. We also "knew" from the Bible that it would end through a conflict between the United States/Israel representing God versus the Soviet Union/China representing the devil. Oops again.)

We wanted a simple, clear, efficient, and convenient plan for getting to heaven after death. Between now and then, we wanted clear assurance that God didn't like the people we didn't like, and for the same reasons we didn't like them. Finally, we wanted a rule book that made it objectively clear, with no subjective ambiguity, what behaviors were right and wrong for all time, in all places, and among all cultures, especially if those rules confirmed our views and not those of people we considered "liberal."[90]

While an overly simplified statement of belief may find a heartfelt resonance among long-faithful adherents, for those seeking to engage an unbelieving and more complex audience, there is a necessity to express the message in thoughts and language more likely to be received. In the pluralistic and diverse cultural conversation of postmodern America it has become essential to contextualize the Christian message into the conventions of the contemporary setting. The challenge of contextualization finds expression in every generation. Clyde Fant draws a parallel between the heresies of the early church periods, which questioned the nature of Christ, and the struggle in the modern period with questions regarding preaching.

> These same dangers threaten proclamation. Preaching must recognize that it stands between the attraction of two powerful poles: to its right, "the faith once delivered," this historical given of the eternal Word; to its left, the present situation, the existential given or our own contemporary culture. Christian proclamation is intimately connected with both.[91]

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[90] McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 159-160.

[91] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 28.

The challenge of distinguishing between gospel and culture is described by Lesslie

Newbigin.

> It seems clear that no one is willing, in the last resort, to accept a total relativism about culture. All of us judge some elements of culture to be good and some bad. The question is whether these judgments arise from the gospel itself or from the cultural presuppositions of the person who makes the judgment. And, if one replies that they ought to be made only on the basis of the gospel itself, the reply must be that there is no such thing as a gospel which is not already culturally shaped.[92]

The challenge of contextualization includes discovering new language to

articulate the message, and new methods of discourse reflecting the conventions of

culture. The challenge reaches deeper to redefine the essential substance of theology,

distinct from a relevant construct appropriate to a particular period. This challenge is

demonstrated when defining the core theological aim of evangelism.

There is some theological disagreement over what exactly is entailed with

effective evangelism. Often the very results presented as objective measurements are, in

fact, themselves elements of context. In one context, the measure of effectiveness may

be the number of hands raised or cards marked in response to a sermon. However, this

may be critiqued as a method that was historically never indicated until nineteenth-

century America and, therefore reflects cultural context more than essential evangelism.

When inquiry is then made how conversions were indicated in earlier periods of history,

it might be that emphasis is placed on the completion of a catechism or curriculum. In

one context of time and place the aim of the gospel is best defined by new churches being

established where there were none before. In another context of time and place the

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[92] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 186.

defined aim of evangelism may reflect behavioral change among individuals and within society. In yet another context, evangelism may be defined by baptisms performed or catechisms completed or some other relevant factor especially pertinent to a given cultural setting.

In the biblical record of the early chapters of Acts in and around the very Jewish context of Jerusalem, effective evangelism was commonly measured by baptisms and adding to the number of those who were being saved. It is accurate to assume at this juncture these "head counts" of Christian conversion were not understood as distinct from Judaism; they were all Jews, except those cases in which the non-Jewish ethnicity of converts is pointed out. As the biblical record shifts in the later chapters of Acts to the Greco-Roman context of westward expansion, the measure of effective evangelism becomes identified with a church, or a congregation of believers, present in the city; in this context, they were presumed somewhat distinct from the Jewish synagogue in those locations where a church and a synagogue were both present.

The section that follows further addresses the implication of what is an appropriate measure in the postmodern era to constitute effective evangelism. At this point, the question of how to measure evangelism is raised in order to demonstrate how the character of preaching is often shaped by the theological aims that are defined. The theological aims of evangelistic preaching are often clouded by changing context. What in one era is presumed to be the measurable result of effective evangelism may not be recognizably present in eras before or after. Consequently, the definition of effectiveness must be given relative to the theological aims within a given context.

Over the centuries, the measure of effectiveness in evangelism has taken on a variety of means, each in some way reflecting alignment with the Christian faith. As the focus is narrowed to twenty-first century American evangelicalism, the theological task is to define what measure in the present era best expresses alignment with the Christian faith, and how that measure compares and contrasts with earlier eras and other contexts.

Evangelical Responses in a Changing Culture

In order to avoid preaching a distinctly modern gospel in a postmodern context, it has been necessary to distinguish timeless elements of the gospel and extrapolate how those elements, have in the past, been marked with modern characteristics. Armed with this discernment, the gospel may be proclaimed in the future apart from characteristics that are truthfully less "gospel" and more "modern." As has been stated, the modern era with its emphasis upon knowledge and information has been prone to interpret belief in terms of correct understanding, intellectual assent, and doctrinal alignment. Consequently, evangelism has oriented itself around concepts of decision, correct answers, and right words.

While these constructs may be helpful to persuade belief and understanding, it goes too far to equate these as synonymous with gospel or to insinuate that the absence of these is evidence for unbelief. In the New Testament "belief" is couched in ideas that only imply, or at times even omit, cognitive attainment. Contrarily, the New Testament emphasizes confession, baptism, alliance with the collective, acts of justice and mercy, following a pattern of behavioral practice, and a number of other measures.

A theology of evangelistic preaching recognizes how the determined theological aim of evangelism often shapes the character of preaching. Therefore, attention must be given to the possible aims of evangelism to evaluate whether they are essential substance or mere conventions of context.

In the modern era, especially in American Protestantism, decision became so central to belief that the point of decision was incorporated into a form known as "the altar call." The altar itself precedes modernism and has been present in Catholic traditions for centuries as the location for receiving the host, a practice dating back as early as the second century.[93] The notion of an altar "call" may be equated with the priests' invitation to come forward to receive the host in the Catholic tradition. Likewise, its practice situated at the end of the order of service in the mass is a centuries old practice, which may have pre-determined the American Protestant evangelical altar call. For these several reasons the altar call became an established practice and had become so pervasive that a generation of twentieth century Protestant Evangelicals find it difficult to conceive of Christian decision, belief, and evangelism occurring or being validated in any other way.

By the end of the twentieth century, the altar call practice, far from being abandoned, had evolved into variations, though in ways that still emphasized decision. Practices of raising a hand at the close of a meeting, marking a specific box on a printed card, or quietly mouthing the words of a corporate prayer have all become further means to manifest a decision being made. It followed naturally, then, that the measure of

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[93] Eucharist traditions are recorded in the Didache, though it is difficult to determine when the act of coming forward as part of worship liturgy was first practiced.

effectiveness in evangelism was to count decisions that had been made, or to put it in terms of the modern information age, minds that had been made up. From this perspective faith, in its simplest definition, was a matter of becoming convinced. Likewise, the individual decision became the valid indicator of belief. Practices such as baptism, learning, and religious actions became maturations of the initial decision, but the decision itself remained the prominent element of belief and the goal of evangelism in modern theology.

This fact is illustrated by a popular evangelistic model known as the Engel scale, developed by James Engel.[94] Typical of modern analysis, in the Engel scale the experience of moving from unbelief to belief is dissected into a mathematical bandwidth, much like the spectrum of electromagnetic wavelengths applied to visible light, where numerical values are assigned to identifiable decision-making steps arranged in a sequential order of progress. Questions arise about the universality or sequential order of spiritual experience, and the linear arrangement of steps; however, at this point, the scale is mentioned only to highlight that the center point in the Engel Scale, that line of demarcation indicated with a value of zero between negative values and positive values, is the personal decision where theological justification and regeneration occurs. While such a cognitive analysis of the journey of personal faith is a helpful model, it is yet one that represents a distinctly modern character, where the theological aim involves crossing a line of cognitive awareness.

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[94] See Engel, James F. and W. H. Norton, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?: A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: MN: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975).

By contrast, while not entirely postmodern in its presentation, another model, called the Gray Matrix, seeks to move beyond the rigid modern character of the Engle Scale and encompass a more dynamic reflection of the experience of spiritual journey.[95] In contrast to the single spectrum of the Engel Scale, the Gray Matrix features the mathematical diagram of four quadrants created by an "X" axis and a "Y" axis. The "Y" axis represents degrees of cognitive awareness and the "X" axis represents dimensions of attitudinal openness. By drawing upon multiple variables a greater range of spiritual journey may be illustrated. Furthermore, a less rigid theological aim of evangelism may be described simply as movement upward and rightward.

When the theological aim of evangelism is presented in this way it allows inclusion of multiple measures, granting freedom from the bounds of modern contextualization; to include, but also extend beyond, its rigid theological aim of cognitive awareness. Also, when viewed this way, the conventions of a pluralistic and diverse cultural conversation may be engaged by identifying shared aims. Thus, those shared aims that are clearly upward on the diagram, even if not overtly Christian, still contribute to the aim of evangelism. Likewise, other shared aims that are clearly rightward on the diagram, even if lacking spiritual distinction, still contribute to the aim of evangelism. Furthermore, a dynamic approach to evangelism incorporates emerging priorities for missional proclamation in a changing culture.

With changes in culture the challenge includes not only distinguishing timeless elements of the gospel from any particular cultural contextualization, but also identifying

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[95] See Frank Gray of Far East Broadcasting Company. While Gray Matrix is of established notability, its origin is obscure from *Radio Programming Roles; FEBC Perspectives* (ver. 2.30), 1996.

new, more appropriate expressions of essential evangelism. The view forward is aided

by comparison with the view past. Describing the contextualization of the gospel Lesslie

Newbigin says,

> It has often been said that during the period of liberal Protestantism, when innumerable "lives of Jesus" were written, designed to help educated middle-class Europeans and Americans to respond to the gospel, the portraits that resulted were very obviously self-portraits. They told you more about the writer then about Jesus. But that criticism has much wider application. If one looks at the long history of Christian art one can see in successive portraits of Jesus the self-portrait of the age.[96]

Newbigin goes on to describe a gallery of portraits reflecting the cultural context of

particular eras of history to demonstrate how the gospel can "come alive" in all these

different cultural contexts, and still be the same authentic gospel. A succession of

cultural expressions shown to be relative to context greatly enhances an open

consideration of what new expression the gospel might take in the emerging postmodern

culture. As a result, a more dynamic understanding of evangelism will give shape to

evangelistic preaching for a changing culture.

Missiological Ramifications for Evangelistic Preaching

The theological implications for evangelism in a changing culture call for

reinterpreting the place and role of cognitive information among other elements in the

experience of belief. As the scientific revolution gave rise to an Information Age, the

static point of decision became the appropriate measure of evangelism, which in turn

wielded influence upon preaching and the prevalence of invitations or altar calls as

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[96] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 141.

typical responses in modern evangelism. By the mid-twentieth century the theological fabric had already shown strands of process theology and pluralism being woven into a broader interpretation of gospel contextualization. While the initial response from American evangelicalism was to draw battle lines and defend an orthodox gospel from the invasion of liberalism, as the foment has subsided a new energy has emerged for articulating the gospel in ways that acknowledge theological variances rather than simply dismissing them as wrong. A resulting challenge is to re-focus the aims of evangelism beyond simply that of converting unbelievers to believers by means of cognitive reason, and, as indicated in the previous section, discover an approach more appropriate to the changing culture of the postmodern era.

A theological perspective that accounts for postmodern contextualization will be careful to maintain a tension between the gospel in its universal and timeless essence with an open-handed exploration into new expressions. Historical patterns through such revolutionary changes have placed the source of emerging developments outside the formal theological contexts. The life cycle of organizations reinforces the idea that, when a stage of maturity is attained, in this case theological maturity, energies become focused on preserving and defending what already exists, even to the sharp critique of new and innovative methods. Though not necessary it is far more likely that significant new advancements in theological expression are likely to arise from the frontiers rather than the established interiors. Expressed in Hegelian terms, responding to thesis, antithesis is the more likely catalyst for synthesis, because antithesis is fueled by the aim of results—the failure of traditional methods to produce them; and the desire to discover or regain greater effectiveness at achieving them. In past eras of transition innovative trends in

evangelistic preaching have arisen from the streets far more than from the seminary. The

modern era featured reformers who were willing to risk departure from the established

methods of articulating medieval authority. The postmodern era is likely to feature a

similar class of innovative evangelistic preachers.

The waning results of effectiveness in evangelism is because as Timothy Downs

asserts, "America is not the same place of harvest that it was forty years ago."[97] After

identifying several cultural trends that contribute to changes Downs summarizes the

effect it has had upon evangelism with four statements:

> Christians are retreating from the culture, taking an adversarial attitude.
> The non-Christian culture is becoming more hostile in return.
> The culture, from a Christian perspective, is eroding rapidly.
> If Christians don't begin to sow, we've seen our last harvest.[98]

In the culture of modern America, evangelism could rightfully assume that

hearers of the gospel had at least some familiarity with the Christian message and the

Bible, and for that matter that in any given presentation the entire gospel message could

be communicated. Timothy Downs states, "Because times have changed, fewer

Americans today may be receptive to a complete presentation of the gospel."[99] Short of a

complete presentation of the gospel message, the concern for evangelism has increasingly

become gaining audience for the message at all. Consequently, emerging definitions of

evangelism include elements such as establishing commonly shared agreement,

preliminary bridging of gaps in assumptions, and fostering resonance with mutually

desirable effects.

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[97]Downs, *Finding Common Ground*, 179.

[98] Ibid., 180.

[99] Ibid., 107.

At present it has now become the burden of evangelism to gain audience. Foreign missions, due to cultural contexts with less history of mainstream Christianity, make an assumption that there is a prior work of "bridging" in both language and culture that must be done before the gospel message, much less response to the gospel, may be done. This is no less true with evangelism in a culture where, though the language and culture shares some element of common ground, there remains a gap between worldviews, philosophies, or theological/spiritual assumptions. As Christianity has become marginalized in Western society, there is a cultural gap that requires preliminary missionary work to bridge the way in order for the gospel to make inroads of effectiveness.

Addressing the preliminary work of evangelism Timothy Downs asks the question, "Why do we have to pay all this attention to sowing and preparing people? Can't God produce a harvest anytime he wants?"[100] He cites C. S. Lewis using an example for an answer,

> C. S. Lewis was once asked why anyone should bother to pray to God. Why does God need us to tell him anything when he already knows everything? Lewis responded that God doesn't need farmers to make food, either. In other words: It's not an issue of what God *can* do, but how he *chooses* to work on a regular basis. It's quite true that at any time that God pleases he can produce a harvest, regardless of our role in the process. God *can* do it without us—but most of the time he chooses not to.[101]

Foreign missionary work, always with an end in view of evangelistic presentation of the gospel message with effective response, undertakes a great deal of cultural

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[100] Ibid., 192.

[101] Ibid.

bridging as means to that end. While such preparatory work is often long and tedious for the missionary, with minimal evidence of progress, an unwaveringly devoted commitment to it is common among missionaries. Enormous amounts of work, far removed from overt evangelism, are earnestly undertaken from the knowledge that it is necessary to gain audience for the gospel. Furthermore, the work of bridging cultural gaps is embraced with an enthusiasm buoyed by the awareness of its necessity. Even when the gospel remains distant and overt evangelism is not soon expected, missionaries are engaged and highly conscious of what is being prepared.

Historically, Christianity had been so centralized in the development of modern culture that evangelism was a related but distinct concept from missions. With the marginalization of Christianity in the secular culture of twenty-first century America, the notion of evangelism must become more directly aligned with missions—these may become one in the same. Evangelism, to be effective, must be weighted much more heavily toward the work of bridging culture as a means to present the gospel. The idea that evangelism can simply articulate a message for an already somewhat knowledgeable and receptive audience may have passed with the twentieth century. The residual common ground of language and custom with the mainstream culture may actually create a deception that the gospel has audience for evangelism, when in fact the message is couched in assumptions that sound foreign or even wrong to those receiving it.

The parallel between foreign missions and postmodern evangelism highlight the need for bridging cultural gaps. However, there is a cautionary lesson that foreign missions is learning which must be kept in mind. During the modern period, no doubt backed by the centrality of Christianity in the dominant West, foreign missions reflected

heavy colonialism, which carried with it a superiority complex. To describe it in the historical terminology, the white man would come in with power and resources in an exploitive manner. Common results included a build-up of resentful hostility from the proud heritage of nationals aware that they were being patronized or exploited, and in some cases very un-Christian practices ensued that were tolerated as means to a higher end.

The state of foreign mission in the twenty-first century is beginning to show a conscientious remorse for rampant colonialism and much greater sensitivity and genuine respect for indigenous culture, not as an inferior people to be dominated, but as an equal, and in some spheres perhaps superior, contributor to greater good and societal, global improvement. The introduction of Christian evangelism is done as a contribution to the shared interest in societal improvement.

By contrast, much evangelism in American religion still reflects a character of colonial superiority and domination, belied by the terminology of "winning" souls. The theological mandate as well as the methodology does not always stem from a mutual and collective improvement made by a variety of contributors, where spiritual matters happen to be a forte of the evangelizer(s). Instead, the imposed improvement laid upon recipients intends no reciprocation in any mutuality.

There appears to be a growing recognition of the colonial character and the hindrance it creates for effectiveness. Emerging efforts to supplement and replace colonialism with a more effective character creates a greater degree of mutual participation in a larger cultural effort toward improvement in societal and global conditions. Theologically, the aim of evangelism must shift, actually return, to the notion

that faith is but one voice entering a cultural conversation shared by many. Contrary to

the dominant voice of colonialism, the Christian voice will reflect humility, graciousness,

and mutual respect with other voices sharing the dialogue.

The timeless truth of the gospel is not obsolete or abandoned; but neither is it

adequate in and of itself; it demands more. And this is where evangelistic preaching

becomes essential. Fred Craddock emphasizes this by saying,

> Whoever thinks that "telling them the truth" is all that is necessary to dispel
> human ills is going to spend a great deal of time shaking the dust off the feet and
> traveling. You and I should face it: speeches on the transcendent values of
> ultimate reality can be awfully dull. As Kierkegaard put it, "Truth is not nimble
> on its feet;" it can be heavy-footed and pedestrian. And those of us concerned
> with communicating the Christian gospel, while confessing to the intrinsic
> adequacy of the message for salvation, must all the while follow the operational
> principle, if it has been heard. To effect that hearing is no small task.[102]

Craddock adds further, "our task is not just to say the word and to tell the truth, but to get

the truth heard…"[103]

During the modern period, carried forward by the leadership of Reformers

including Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, the practice of theology was predominantly

focused upon codifying the content of belief into systems of rational thought, generally in

the form of cognitive propositions. Recent centuries produced a character of preaching

which reflected the rational structure of cognitive information. Consequently,

evangelism featured the theological aim of convincing listeners to reach a decision,

typically in response to information presented in the form of logical argument. As the

modern era transitions into the postmodern period the practice of theology as well as the

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[102] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 9.

[103] Ibid., 11.

content of theology reflects a shift in the aims of evangelism. Nowhere is a dismissal of the theological contributions of modern cognitive information implied; however, emerging energies place greater emphasis upon the conversation with pluralistic culture and the shared interests of common good in the world. The result is a conceptually less rigid evangelism with an emphasis upon bridging cultural gaps. The emerging priorities for evangelistic preaching find preexisting reference already present in the Bible and the examples of Jesus contained therein. Emerging theology for evangelistic preaching in postmodern American evangelicalism may actually be nothing new at all; but rather a rediscovery of long-established patterns which have been merely buried beneath the tide of modern developments in systematic theology.

PART THREE

PERSUASION IN POSTMODERN CULTURE

CHAPTER 5

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF PERSUASION

The missional imperative of evangelistic preaching implies a theological "stewardship" entrusted with the responsibility of utilizing available resources and discernment for understanding the intricacies of the culture as well as the state of the art in communication. As such the field of research in persuasive communication is crucial, but routinely overlooked, in evangelistic preaching, being considered "secular" or unspiritual. However, evangelism, though mysteriously based in a spiritual reality that only God can accomplish, incorporates the human facets of persuasive communication. Diverse factors of persuasion, from physiology of the human brain to the differences between written and oral communication, all bear upon engaging listeners.

Preaching the gospel persuasively involves more than a sound theological basis and a relevant cultural perspective; there must also be an emotional connection on the part of the recipient. Within the human brain there is a complex process by which such a connection occurs. Interest in a message, emotional triggers both conscious and subconscious, interpretation of meaning, and a host of other factors all combine to form response to persuasion. Awareness of these factors, while no guarantee of effectiveness, nonetheless informs persuasive communication.

The aim of evangelism is to affect change creating a closer alignment with the person of Christ. Effectiveness in doing so, whether intuitively or intentionally, arises from addressing factors inside the mind of the listener. This chapter explores those

factors in order to heighten the effectiveness of persuasion especially for evangelistic preaching.

Empirical analysis of human brain structure has informed a growing understanding of persuasion. It may seem ironic that a major tenet of this dissertation is the limitations of modern empiricism, when it comes to persuasion in postmodern culture, and yet in this chapter it is the selfsame empirical analysis that is being utilized to make a persuasive case for empirical limitations. There are two perspectives which merit emphasis at this point.

First, at no point in the present consideration has a case been made for the obsolescence or abandonment of contributions to understanding that are of a distinctly modern character, rather for an extension beyond the limits of empirical analysis to embrace postmodern modes, vague as they may at times seem. This subtle emphasis may be shown with the vocabulary used to contrast modern and postmodern characteristics. Modern understanding includes words like rational, objective, and static; whereas postmodern development in understanding contrasts these with terms such as relativity, subjective, and fluid. The contrast implied is not the opposite, but an extension beyond rigid limitations imposed by empiricism. Thus, in contrast to the term *rational*, rather than using the term *irrational*, instead the terms *extra-rational* or *supra-rational* are used. In contrast to the term *logical*, rather than using the term *illogical*, instead *conditional* or *relative* is used.

Second, modern empiricism remains a dominant force in many sectors of Western twenty-first-century culture. While postmodern tendencies are being readily adopted in art, literature, and philosophy, in the sciences and academic endeavors the emergence of

these characteristics, while present, is much slower and rests upon a modern articulation

of new concepts in the language and constructs of modern approaches. An academic

dissertation certainly falls in the latter category and therefore will reflect strong rational

language and constructs, even when making a case for extra-rational validity. The

present era is clearly a transitional period where waning and emerging constructs and

language are equally represented. Empirical brain research, greatly advanced using

modern scientific analysis, contributes a foundational framework upon which to

understand persuasive communication.

Neuro-Physiological Elements of Communication

In the modern era advances in scientific research that originated in the physical

sciences have broadened to include the more theoretical behavioral sciences as well. As

a result there is a growing body of scientific theory regarding how the human brain works

in response to environmental stimuli. While recent decades have returned many bright

successes of neuroscience in the discovery of human brain function, even more so the

frontier of neurological discovery has widened exponentially. For all the conclusions that

may be drawn greater mysteries emerge. Cordelia Fine acknowledges the caveat of

subjectivity required with the findings of brain research.

> As cognitive neuroscience continues to explore the neural mechanisms that
> underlie memory, perception, self-identity, judgment and action, it should never
> lose sight of the fact that every brain has been individually influenced by culture,
> experience and context. Exciting new evidence of the brain's "neuroplasticity"
> most obviously underlies this point, with its demonstration of structural and
> functional changes in the brain in response to experience.[104]

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[104] Cordelia Fine, *Introduction to Britannica Guide to the Brain* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2008) , xvi.

Research has greatly advanced our understanding of the circuitry of the brain and the electrochemical processes involved with neurotransmission underlying physical and behavioral functions. However, the complexity of the nervous system and its reflexive response to stimuli leaves much yet to be codified as scientific understanding. The enormous complexity is demonstrated in describing a single synapse.

> Considering that any one or more of these neuromessengers can be released, either singly or in combination, by any of the brain's 100 to 200 billion neurons, each with its connections to a thousand or more other neurons, it is clear that the language of the brain is exceedingly complex and the number of brain states is inconceivably large.[105]

Given the complexity of a single synapse, together with the myriad of processes involved with functions of language and emotion, the experience of communication and persuasion are far from simple matters of mapping neuropaths in the human brain. However, research using MRI to observe the brain under specific stimuli has begun to identify recognizable patterns of activity that, if not predictable, are at least consistent. Caution should be taken in drawing any final conclusions, but it can be seen that with language, emotion, communication, and persuasion there is a clear interaction between neuro-physiology and specific stimuli.

With communication and persuasion there is a consistent observation that the effect of these is not a direct correlation of only the tangible elements incorporated. For example, communication, or the means by which a message is conveyed, may be analytically reduced to the elements of language such as words, definitions, sentences, and expression. These however, do not fully comprise the synergistic "meaning" so

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[105] Ibid., 34.

inherent to communication. In order for the meaning of a message to be communicated, there are other elements involved that comprise the more subjective characteristics of affective response. What has been discovered, though, in modern scientific research is that the behavioral elements previously considered too subjective for empirical analysis are increasingly found to have a neurological and physiological blueprint. As recognizable patterns of consistency are identified it becomes possible to map known neuropaths which respond consistently, independent of individual subjects.

In a prominent model detailing the language function in the human brain it is widely accepted that speech originates from the Wernick's area of the temporal lobe in the left hemisphere of the prefrontal cortex; while expression originates from Boca's area in the frontal lobe.[106] Similarly, the limbic system, or paleomammilian brain, is a set of structures associated with functions of emotion, memory, and motivation.[107] Neurological research has identified a tight connection between the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. Persuasion, then, is a complex process between language and emotion, linking communication with affective response.

The limbic system will be addressed in the following section, detailing what is known, as well as what remains uncertain, about how the brain processes neuro-electrical stimuli into thoughts, feelings, and behavioral response. At this point however, the limbic system is identified to emphasize how reliant communication is upon factors well beyond words and language. Further, the evangelistic aim of communicating in order to

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[106] Ibid., 124-125.

[107] Ibid., 105.

persuade, will utilize affective elements of neuro-physiology, whether consciously or not, in order to be effective.

To be sure, simply understanding how the brain works, does not automatically translate into persuasive communication. However, those striving to be effective in evangelism do well not to ignore the causal source for waning results of persuasion in response to a timeless message. The problem lies, not in the message itself, much less the Person behind the message, but rather in the conveyance of that message in a manner that not only gains a hearing, but also gains affective reception of the message leading toward persuaded response.

Engaging listeners, the central subject of this dissertation, requires captivating the interest of a human mind, and doing so as an initial step in a sequence of occurrences toward persuasion. For all the advances in scientific understanding of the human brain, this process remains more art than science. However, the framework of understanding becomes a reference for evaluating factors as they may hinder or contribute toward engaging listeners persuasively.

Utilizing the objective structure of empirical analysis in the area of brain function relative to persuasion is a means to apply more subjectively the supra-rational implications for evangelistic preaching in a postmodern culture. Rather than cast rational objectivity and relative subjectivity into static categories of "either/or," this is an effort to demonstrate the validity of the fluid relativity of "both/and" as a legitimate means of intellectual dialogue. The empirical analysis of persuasion is a framework from which to explore subjective extensions into applied implications regarding persuasion as it occurs in the practice of evangelistic preaching. Thus, to describe humor or a story as a more

effective means than propositional statements to captivate interest among listeners, the

claim can be validated by how these experiences occur differently in the human brain.

In addition to the physiological mechanics of language involved with

communication, there is another related sphere of brain activity involved with emotion.

Research indicates that emotions (via limbic response) exert a stronger influence on

persuasion and decision than does information alone (via prefrontal cortex response).

Yet evangelism, as it has emerged in the modern era has focused an inordinate measure

of attention on the informational content of preaching. In order to regain effectiveness,

and especially in the changing postmodern culture of America, preaching will need to

supplement the cognitive aspects of persuasion with a much greater attention to affective

elements.

The correlation between emotion and cognition affects persuasion directly, but

also indirectly the perceptions and thoughts that are interpreted with communication.

Research on behavior and emotions is summarized as follows:

> Biosocial and constructivist theories agree that perception, thought, imagery, and
> memory are important cause of emotion. They also agree that once emotion is
> activated, emotion and cognition influence each other. How people feel affects
> what they perceive, think, and do, and vice versa.[108]

In a complex interaction of memories, emotion, learning, and conditioning, the

brain continually develops. The exact same stimuli generating one type of response in

one brain may generate a different response in a different brain. Likewise, in one brain,

stimulus at one point in time may generate a response different from the same stimulus at

another point in time. While a modern view regards cognition as static information

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[108] Ibid., 110.

arising from logic, it is becoming clear that information is more fluid than may at first appear, due to the neuroplasticity of the brain. A concluding assessment of the relationship between emotion and cognition states, "Emotion states influence what people perceive, learn, and remember, and they are involved in the development of empathic, altruistic, and moral behavior and in basic personality traits."[109]

Evangelism implies persuasion more even than communication. Among those already persuaded there may be communication that illicit the same emotional reactions, but would not be classified as evangelism. Among those who are not believers, there may be communication that illicit emotional response that does not result in persuasion. Between these similarities, the essence of evangelism is persuasion. Persuasion viewed from the perspective of brain mechanics occurs when the response of emotion is linked to informed decision-making. Theologically, there is a spiritual element that transcends neuro-physiological electro-stimuli; however it is more likely that life change on a behavioral level occurs, not by circumventing, but in conjunction with the neuro-physics of persuasion.

Evangelistic preaching can neither assume recipients of a message are clean slates of no emotional reaction who will respond purely on a cognitive basis to information alone, nor that un-persuaded recipients share the same emotional response to a message that already persuaded believers do. In a period when there is an over-abundance of information to begin with, when religious sources no longer find automatic trust and reputable confidence, when many have memories scarred by harsh experiences from institutional religion, the assumption cannot be made that the veracity of information

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[109] Ibid., 111.

alone possesses the power to persuade. Positive elements of affective response greatly affect the persuasiveness of communication. However, there is error in assuming that what is viewed positively by those already persuaded will result in the same response from those un-persuaded. Messages presented must be considered just as surely in light of negative affective response as positive. Credibility, and thus receptivity, is gained far better by acknowledging barriers to acceptance and addressing those barriers than by maintaining naïve optimism that they do not exist. Further, efforts to persuasively illicit agreement will be more effective by involving receptive emotions than by merely presenting information alone, appealing to the cognitive response.

Factors That Govern Affective Response

Research into mapping the brain has produced high awareness of the human limbic system and the ways it operates. While the limbic system features structures such as the thalamus and hypothalamus, recognized as being involved with involuntary functions including sensations, regulation of bodily functions and processes of growth and development; it also includes structures such as the hippocampus and amygdala, involved with learning and memory, affecting innate and emotional reactions.[110] The limbic system is far more instrumental in persuasion and decision-making than most intelligent people admit. Efforts in persuasive communication will benefit from increased awareness by heeding the insights from those neuro-physiological factors directing affective response.

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[110] Ibid., 105

While the informational content of communication may seem to represent overwhelmingly cognitive functions, how that information is processed, the way meaning is interpreted, and its ability to persuade are very dependent upon other, clearly non-cognitive brain functions. The limbic system is what Bert Decker calls the "first brain" in a creative description of brain processes involved with communication.

> It should be obvious by now that effective communication is a lot more than simply transferring information from me to you, or vice versa. There is a gate between us through which communication must pass. The gate is tended by a Gatekeeper, standing guard before the House of the Intellect. The Gatekeeper's name is *First Brain*.
> Will the Gatekeeper open or close the gate of communication? Will our message get through, or will it be blocked?
> Whenever we communicate, our listener's Gatekeeper is right there on guard, figuratively asking, "Friend or foe?" The Gatekeeper has complete power to grant or deny access to our listener's higher analytical and decision-making processes. A New Communicator is a person who knows how to befriend the Gatekeeper, who knows how to become "First Brain friendly," so that his or her message can get through effectively and persuasively.[111]

Affective response is a highly subjective domain, but there are at least categorical factors that summarize the elements of limbic process involved in making choices and decisions. These can include the feelings or thoughts of pleasure (or displeasure) and the release of dopamine and epinephrine in the brain to subconsciously foster acceptance (or rejection). This process in turn may be directly linked by the brain's process of memory and association. Within the limbic system the memory and association of particular stimuli conditions innate and emotional response, even on a subconscious level, so that communication is interpreted according to affective response, often without the listener's own awareness.

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[111] Bert Decker, *You've Got to be Believed to be Heard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 47.

The neurological aspect of communication is often described with the terms *encoding* or sending and *decoding* or receiving. One thoroughgoing conclusion of modern analysis in communication is that the decoding element of message conveyance is far more significant that all other elements combined, certainly more than the encoding. It follows that communication will be as concerned if not more, with how a message is heard than how it is said.

Often [mis]quoted is a statistic presented by Albert Mehrabian, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, UCLA, whose research identified three elements of face-to-face communication with a numerical measurement of the degree to which each conveyed feelings and attitudes. His findings have been codified into a well-known rule that response to communication consists of 7 percent words used, 38 percent tone of voice, and 55 percent body language.[112] The statistic actually was in reference to research upon feelings and attitudes expressed in communication and should not be understood to apply to all communication. However, the implication is that communication comprises far more than simply a shared vocabulary. Indirect elements are of greater influence than overt factors for communicating clearly and persuasively.

What has become evident in the area of speech translates to other areas of communication as well. The subjective aspects of communication occurring via electro-stimuli within the brain do so regardless of the sense engaged. Sensations of sound, sight, touch, and feeling all convert to neuro-stimuli within the human brain, which comprise the actual experience of communication. While cognitive function may consciously distinguish between sources of communication, the affective responses so

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[112] Mehrabian, Albert, *Silent Messages* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971), 75-80.

influential in how a message is interpreted routinely occur on a subconscious level. In this way, indirect elements of persuasion may be affected by factors that have little or nothing at all to do with the source of the message, or the content of the message.

The early icon originating the modern understanding of indirect elements of communication was Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan is famous for coining the phrase, "the medium is the message"[113] to refer to the relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. He identified how technological media was instrumental in shaping culture which actually produced changes to human consciousness. In regards to communication he identified the invention of movable type as the source behind a global shift to a cultural predominance of the visual over the oral and aural. McLuhan's work predated the internet, but, among his "four epochs of history," he anticipated what he termed the" electronic age."[114] McLuahn's thought indicated that a shift in the manner of communication, from the modern era to the postmodern era, would occur as a result.

There is often an observation made regarding younger generations born after the onset of television. Research indicates that hours spent watching television actually affects the formation of neuropaths within the brain. For purposes of this dissertation, it is noted that communication effective at persuasion in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century is not likely to receive the same response in the current century, simply by the fact that brains function differently due to the effects of the "electronic age."

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[113] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 8.

[114] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 11.

During the modern period, great emphasis was placed on the logical content of a message, or what is said in communication. It is now becoming evident that what is heard is the more significant element of communicating clearly, much less persuasively. Speaking directly about evangelism the scripture asks in Romans 10:14, "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" Apart from the other questions in the context, which identify several factors involved with evangelistic preaching, this particular question addresses the element within the recipient of the gospel message, the "hearer." Technically, "hearing" is one sense of perception among others, but the statement implies metaphorically the entire range of perception, or more specifically reception, as with a message. The essential idea is that communication necessitates message reception (perception) on the part of the recipient. When it comes to evangelism, a great deal of focus has been made upon the content of the gospel message being conveyed, or "encoded." However, there can be no response to a message communicated until it is heard, or "decoded." "Heard" is a reference to perception, which, in ordinary language and some technical language is more significant than merely physiological auditory function.

There may be truth in the words of a time-honored popular notion, "a picture paints a thousand words." Non-verbal elements such as body language can greatly affect meaning conveyed in communication. As was previously mentioned, postmodern American culture has become increasingly driven by visual media, often replacing what previously was oral or printed. Consequently, the population receives communication differently than in previous centuries. Therefore, when Romans 10:14 asks, "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" it is important not to limit

"hearing" to the literal experience of auditory oral communication. The message "heard"
in postmodern culture may actually be the 1000-fold character of pictures and images
conveyed via electronic media.

Hearing, even when limited to the specific perception of the brain's experience of
making sense of sound waves falling upon the physiological instruments related to the
ear, much less the implied experience of sensory perception beyond auditory, has been
shown to be far more complex than a simple description. Visual perception includes light
waves received through the apparatus of the human eye which are then converted into
neuro-electrical stimuli upon the brain and mentally received with intelligence in a
complex process of seeing. Visual perception ranges from sight to illusion without
distinction. Experiments with lighting, binocular focus, and patterns have demonstrated
illusion to indicate that perception is a much greater reality than an empirical experience
of light waves being converted to stimulus. As amazing as the sense of sight is, what
happens inside the brain is the more significant aspect of vision.[115]

Likewise with hearing, the auditory process as amazing as it is with the cochlea,
and the small bones of the inner ear, is merely the apparatus to convert sound waves into
neuro-electrical stimuli in the brain, which is where hearing becomes much more
complex. Similar to visual illusions, there are auditory perceptions that are subject to
highly plural and relative interpretation.

In order to account for these interpretive elements a communicator must literally
get inside a person's head. The work of evangelism, and the focus of this dissertation, is

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[115] See"The Mind's Eye" in Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*,(New York: W. W. Norton &
Co., 2009) , 211-298.

an effort to do just that—namely recognize message "reception" as the critical starting point for communication.

Practical Skills for Engaging Listeners

The word *engaging*, according to the dictionary, is an adjective defined as drawing favorable attention or interest. However, experience reveals far more depth to the idea. Engaging includes interesting, troubling, unusual, fascinating, disturbing, captivating, and intriguing to name just a few nuances. These experiences may rise or fall in degree of intensity relative to circumstances, personal connection, prior information, and specific awareness.

As evangelistic preaching seeks to engage listeners it may be difficult to establish rules guaranteed to heighten engagement. However, merely recognizing that the experience of riveting engagement corresponds with specific activity in the human brain will lead to questions about defining categories of communication according to their potential to engage listeners. It is a step of progress toward persuasive communication simply to recognize that the electro-stimuli in the brain revealing engagement "lights up" differently when hearing a fascinating story told with animation, than when hearing a historical account read from a text.

Common features distinguish broad categories of science and art—science generally features data, objective analysis, tested hypothesis, and empirical conclusions; whereas, art features imagery, subjective fluidity, emotional response, and affective influence. The art of persuasion will not ignore the contributions of scientific understanding for developing pragmatic approaches to persuasive engagement; however,

the empirical understanding merely serves as a framework upon which to further develop

persuasive practices. Awareness of the science of brain activity relative to different types

of communication reinforces the art of persuasive and engaging communication.

It is an assertion of this dissertation that the effectiveness of all communication

and especially persuasive communication relies on engaging the attention of recipients be

they listeners, readers, viewers, or recipients of other forms of media. Research in recent

decades has developed a growing understanding of how the physiology of attentiveness

occurs in the human brain. There is a marketing notion called "sticky" that describes the

measure of ideas or other messages in terms of engaging the attention. Malcolm

Gladwell in *The Tipping Point*, describes how stickiness is a recognizable characteristic

of communication which captivates human attention.

> Stickiness sounds as if it should be straightforward. When most of us want to
> make sure what we say is remembered, we speak with emphasis. We talk loudly,
> and we repeat what we have to say over and over again. Marketers feel the same
> way.[116]

After reviewing abundant cases of stickiness, though, a very different conclusion

may be drawn about communication. Among all the examples considered by Gladwell,

something profoundly counterintuitive in the definition of stickiness was discovered.

> We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the
> inherent quality of the ideas we present. But in none of these cases did anyone
> substantially alter the content of what they were saying. Instead, they tipped the
> message by tinkering, on the margin, with the presentation of their ideas…[117]

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[116] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2000), 92.

[117] Ibid., 131.

Marketers, researchers, preachers, and others with a desire to communicate persuasively are discovering that effectiveness depends on factors beyond cognitive information. The content of communication is less significant than the presentation for engaging listeners in a persuasive way. Advanced research evaluates experiences similar to those described above and articulates them in terms of brain circuitry and electrical synapses along neuropaths. The implication for evangelistic preaching is direct— presentation is a critical element of persuasion.

> Gestures and voice emerge as the most obvious and determinative part of preaching. Every empirical study of delivery and its effect on the outcome of a speech or sermon arrives at an identical conclusion: your delivery matters a great deal.
> Not only do your voice and gestures strike the audience's senses first, but your inflections and actions transmit your feelings and attitudes more accurately than your words.[118]

In the next chapter, section 6.4 will address style of presentation as it relates to engaging listeners persuasively. At this point, identifiably persuasive style is addressed to emphasize characteristics of communication that are statistically demonstrated to be more engaging. Evangelistic preaching will result in more effective persuasion when preachers and communicators develop skills for establishing emotional connection with listeners.

From Mental Agreement to Behavioral Change

While genuine Christian conversion involves a spiritual experience underlying any culturally conditioned manner of response, evangelism's effectiveness is, however,

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[118] Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching, p. 202 [For empirical studies he cites Wayne N. Thompson, *Quantitative Research in Public Address and Communication*, (New York, Random House, 1967), 83.]

verified by identifiable behavioral response. Though not the same, there is a

corresponding similarity between spiritual conversion and other forms of individual

decision, whether voting, marrying, purchasing, or any other of significant decisions.

What is revealed by this correlation is how instrumental matters of persuasion are for

acceptance of change. On the surface, acceptance of change can be measured by mental

agreement (indicated by signs such as raising a hand, marking a card). There are

however, indications that mental assent is no guarantee of actual behavioral change. In

fact, some research indicates that limbic response is a much greater litmus test of whether

or not a decision will be matched with a response of measurable behavioral change;

decisions that are made with emotional involvement are more substantial than with

reason alone.

What this means for the work of Christian evangelism is that emotional

connection strengthens the decision reflected in conversion. Of course, the opposite

response, emotion without reason, is also limited in lasting effectiveness. However,

while research indicates that interactivity between emotion and reason together results in

greater likelihood of change, independent of each other, emotion is a stronger indicator of

change than reason.

In a changing culture, the modes of communication themselves, much less the

language and thoughts used, undergo transformation. It follows naturally, then, that

effectiveness at persuasive communication will likewise undergo change. In the modern

period, evangelistic preaching featured cognitive information, usually in the form of

outlines with carefully worded propositions arranged into a line of argument designed to

convince listeners by the merits of the content itself. In the postmodern era, a new set of

assumptions and practices guide effectiveness; and the contrast may be understood as activity in very different parts of the brain. In emerging postmodern culture, content utilized in communication is as much for the power to engage as for the rationality of the information. A greater prevalence of narrative artistry is emerging as the preferred means to engage listeners for more effective persuasion in postmodern communication. Doing so requires a new level of initiative, on the part of preachers, to acquire the perspective, skills, and proficiencies for regaining effectiveness in evangelistic preaching.

CHAPTER 6

THE INITIATIVE FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL IN POST-CHRISTIAN

AMERICA

The cultural transition presently underway in America, coupled with the
theological character of contextualization of the gospel, calls for attention to practical
elements for evangelistic preaching in changing times. It is not enough to simply redress
modern, or pre-modern, assumptions with updated language. The new culture itself must
be truly embraced and the timeless message of the gospel must be understood within the
context of new assumptions. Preaching under postmodern assumptions recognizes that
the gospel is not preached with information alone; there must be initiative to engage
listeners, both in content and style. In the modern era, information itself was highly
engaging as a relevant characteristic reflective of the culture. However, postmodern
culture has grown accustomed to information to the point that, in order for
communication to be engaging, additional elements are required, not instead of, but
beyond information alone.

Apart from the theological distinction between preaching and teaching, the
presentation of propositional academic analysis increasingly fails to evoke emotional
connection thus lacking the dynamic of persuasive communication that such
presentations may have enjoyed in the modern era. In postmodern America, preaching,
and more so evangelistic preaching, requires an affective engagement beyond the
reasoning faculties of the brain. As the cultural context in American evangelicalism has

changed so too must the manner of evangelistic preaching adapt to remain effective for a new frontier.

Every vocational endeavor carries a clear expectation that, in order to remain effective with the passing of time, it is necessary to undergo development, training, re-branding, and assimilation of new practices to maintain proficiency. In the discipline of preaching, no less than medicine, law, or economics, the perpetual advancement of culture requires continued development to maintain a consistent level of proficiency. There is an ever-emerging state-of-the-art that distinguishes contemporary preaching from preaching suffering a stale datedness and waning effectiveness. In the postmodern milieu, a new level of initiative is required to engage the emotive limbic elements of listeners' minds. The new level of required initiative encompasses four areas of expertise including: theological dexterity, cultural awareness, communication skill, and stylistic artistry. The four subsections of this chapter comprise these four proficiencies for engaging evangelistic preaching in postmodern American evangelicalism.

Embracing Correct Assumptions for Postmodern Preaching

During an era of transition innovative approaches bear the twofold burden of defending against the critique of the status quo, and demonstrating valid effectiveness of new modes. Previous chapters and sections of this dissertation have taken up the defense of innovation against common critiques, especially accommodation, by distinguishing distinctly modern characteristics from timeless, biblical, and theological characteristics. This section now turns to the emerging characteristics of postmodern culture and the valid theological assumptions that guide evangelistic preaching in a new era.

The postmodern era is emerging and therefore lacks a codified collection of assumptions that distinguish it from other eras, rendering any assertions to be plausible conjecture at best. However, one approach that has been put forward by Brian McLaren is to identify those assumptions or themes that mark the modern era and conceive of what might be described if the prefix "post-" were applied to each. Doing so has resulted in what McLaren terms "Twelve Themes of Postmodernism"[119] that represent the contrast between the two periods and potential assumptions to be embraced for communicating in a postmodern culture. Consideration here of McLaren's Twelve Themes not only identifies the character of postmodern assumptions, but also contrasts the affect such assumptions have when distinguishing between modern preaching and preaching with postmodern alertness.

Post-Conquest: Modern assumptions of conquest and control are contrasted with post-conquest. The idea is to save or rescue rather than conquer and dominate. In preaching, the modern themes of conquest are represented even by the language to "win" the lost and "take back" ground. A postmodern assumption would be represented by conservation and preservation of good.

Post-Mechanistic: Modern assumptions of mechanistic and reductionistic processes are contrasted with post-mechanistic. The focus is shifted instead to organisms and systems, featuring relationships. In preaching, the modern themes are represented with detailed steps and outlines with blanks to be filled in with answers. A postmodern assumption would be represented by environments conducive for flourishing.

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[119] Brian McLaren, Lecture from "Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix" Fuller Theological Seminary, 20 October 2004.

Post-Analytical: The modern assumption of analytical thought is contrasted with post-analytical. The idea is holistic systems greater than the sum of all respective parts. In preaching, the modern approach is to break concepts down to smaller and simpler fundamentals. A postmodern assumption would be represented by a context of interaction among elements.

Post-Secular: The modern assumption of secular perspective is contrasted with post-secular. The idea is to regain a sense of spiritual mystery. In preaching, the modern approach is to adopt a dichotomy distinguishing between sacred and secular. A postmodern assumption recognizes spirituality and secularism do not exist inherently, but are superimposed interpretations.

Post-Objective: The modern assumption of objectivity is contrasted with post-objective. The idea is that there exists a scientifically neutral status of unbiased empirical perspective. In preaching, the modern emphasis maintained a posture of universally acknowledged agreement. A postmodern assumption readily acknowledges the meta-narrative subjectivity of all perspective and thought.

Post-Critical: The modern assumption of critical review is contrasted with post-critical. The idea is a listening collaborative approach. In preaching, the modern characteristic was asserted by expressing defensible claims in the form of rational argument. A postmodern assumption embraces dialogue with open handed consideration of ideas.

Post-Organization: The modern assumption of organization is contrasted with post-organization. The idea is portrayed as networks formed into alliance. In preaching,

the modern focus is shown by static structures independently defined. A postmodern assumption expects dynamic interaction to shape structures with fluidity and motion.

Post-Individualism: The modern assumption of individualism is contrasted with post-individual. The idea is community or tribalism. In preaching, modern emphasis isolated the individual as the context for faith. A postmodern assumption is captured in the saying, "no man is an island."

Post-Protest: The modern assumption of protest-ant is contrasted with post-protest. The idea is ecumenical diversity. In preaching, the modern proliferation of defined groups featured clarity of distinction. A postmodern assumption appreciates the unique input of diverse contributors.

Post-Consumerism: The modern assumption of consumerism is contrasted with post-consumerism. The idea is stewardship. In preaching, modern consumerism is reflected by cost-to-benefit assessment. A postmodern assumption is marked by a heightened consciousness of "footprint" on a worldwide scale.

Post-Literacy: Modern assumptions of print and literacy are contrasted with post-literacy. The idea is digital technology. In preaching, modern fascination with print and publication has resulted in a very book-oriented focus. A postmodern assumption celebrates the "unbounded" opportunities presented by digital technology.

Post-National: The modern assumption of nationalism is contrasted with post-national. The idea is global. In preaching, the modern geopolitical worldview has often dictated arbitrary limitations upon the scope of relevance. A postmodern assumption recognizes the constant global connectedness and the potential of international representation.

On the surface of persuasive communication, consideration above of McLaren's contrast of themes offers regained credibility with audiences in an era when Christian communication, expressed in overly modern themes, has become marginalized. At a deeper theological level, embracing assumptions such as these leads toward reconsideration of those elements, previously presumed to be theological necessities with evangelistic preaching, that are actually mere cultural reflections of the Modern era. Continued development in the discipline of preaching requires renewed consideration of both the content presented as well as the responsiveness of listeners.

Beyond the notion of credibility with listeners in a theology of evangelism, there is also the character of results used to determine effectiveness. In the modern period, particularly in American evangelicalism, the goal of evangelism was overly defined as converts to Christianity measured by individual decisions. While the hope and expectation was that many other good results would follow, the assumption remained that the personal decision was the salient factor. Increasingly in postmodern regard, the assumption is that, even more than decision, the effects or resulting changes, both individually and collectively, are more valid indicators of the gospel having been proclaimed effectively.

This idea has been expressed, perhaps with a note of sarcasm, by noted modern scholar C. S. Lewis,

> The world does not consist of 100 per cent Christians and 100 per cent non-Christians. There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name: some of them are

clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so.[120]

One of the contrasts between modern and postmodern understanding is with use of the terms *static* and *dynamic*. As has been noted, modern theology has focused upon static definition of ideas and terms. Consequently, the modern theological definition of the term "Christian" has often been reduced to the static definition of individual decision. Lewis' dynamic definition of Christian in the example cited above is less rigid, but a more accurate reflection of biblical and theological breadth. In this view, the general character of evidence is a more valid indicator than the rigid line of demarcation, just as clearly as the absence of character is an indicator of suspicion regarding the demarcation.

The relationship between the two is what the words of Jesus in Matthew 7:15-23 illustrate in reference to false prophets with the metaphor of a tree and its fruit. Ironically, a modern scientific analysis will argue that it is possible for a tree to exist with no fruit, but it is impossible for fruit to exist without there being a tree to produce it. The irony here is that Jesus used the example precisely to counter that line of thought. On another occasion he is portrayed as going so far as to curse a tree that exists without fruit, even when contrary to fruit bearing seasons (see Mark 11:12-25). Similarly, interpretation of this puzzling incident includes the idea that it was a real-life parable of the same contrasting between a static and a dynamic character of spiritual life.

As much as demonstrating the contrast between static and dynamic theological definitions, the tree and fruit example of Jesus also reveals how a reasoned construct is less a reflection of biblical and theological veracity than it is a reflection of modern

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[120] Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952), 176.

culturalization. Hermeneutical debate aside, this example reveals how prone modern

theology is to adhere more closely to static rules of empirical analysis than the dynamic

mystery of biblical truth. There is a modern tendency in preaching to empirically

scrutinize and analyze, even while entirely missing the point. The perspective of

postmodern culture greatly magnifies the character of such a practice to be an indication

not of classical Christian preaching tradition, rather an entrenchment in modern

assumptions.

Embracing new assumptions is hindered by the glorification of past practices.

The high value placed on tradition, especially prevalent in the sphere of religion, often

creates interference for the process of innovation. Hesitant continued development in the

discipline of preaching is what Clyde Fant describes as "coming of age in the pulpit."[121]

> One reason for the perpetual trauma of pulpit puberty, or coming of age in
> the pulpit, is the incredibly persistent myth of the "Golden Age of Preaching,"
> whenever that was. Ask any generation of preachers, and it was exactly three
> generations earlier.[122]

In order to embrace the assumptions of postmodern culture for renewed

effectiveness in evangelistic preaching, there must be a readiness to leave the past behind,

no matter how glorious, and strive toward what is emerging in the future. Clyde Fant

summarizes the patterns of history by stating that "every generation of preachers tends to

romanticize the heroic past and to be overly pessimistic about the present."[123] About the

uncertain future Fant continues, "It will likely be a long while before a new process of

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[121] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 4.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., 6.

routinization emerges. We may never see a new synthesis in our lifetime; like it or not, we may spend our lives searching for the Promised Land. But prediction is really impossible."[124]

While effectiveness for evangelistic preaching in post-Christian America may be unpredictable, it will certainly require embracing postmodern assumptions. Familiarity within a shifting culture is necessary to regain credibility with audiences that clearly distinguish modern themes from timeless themes. Continued development in the discipline of preaching will demand theological dexterity to interpret timeless matters of the Christian gospel and evangelism for the emergence of yet another cultural context.

Living Immersed in Culture

In the modern era, the sharply defined assumptions, usually expressed in precise propositions, consisted of information that was best embraced by being taught. In the postmodern era, the relative assumptions, usually embodied in a metaphor or story, consist of understanding that is best embraced by being caught. Such tacit understanding is captured in the term "personal knowledge" as described by Michael Polyani. Likewise, Leonard Sweet uses the term "abductive" to further extend the notion, reversing the experience from a person grasping tacit understanding to a tacit awareness actually apprehending the person. While the speed and efficiency of gaining tacit understanding varies from person to person, it is clear that the method for doing so is more by immersion into the context than by classroom instruction.

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[124] Ibid., 12.

The notion of living immersed in culture must be understood in light of the marginalization of Christianity that has been described. Continued development in the discipline of preaching has often been relegated to the modern sphere of books, instruction, and information which further perpetuates the marginalization from mainstream culture. Increased proficiency in cultural awareness requires departure from the confines of Christian subculture. The degree to which communicators can be conversant in mainstream culture enhances the connection with, and consequently, the power to engage, listeners. Growing familiar with the mainstream culture, often regarded as secular or non-Christian, is a necessity for effectiveness of evangelistic preaching. Therefore, postmodern preachers must develop a worldview, as well as practical habits, to increase exposure to and appreciation of the larger culture.

The necessity for communicators to be immersed in culture is expressed in what Clyde Fant describes as "Incarnational Preaching."

> Preaching fails the dual promise accorded it by theology—that it bears the eternal Word, and that it touches the contemporary situation—when it betrays the wholeness of its calling by affirming part of its nature and denying the other. To the left, preaching becomes all human; to the right, all divine. To the left, there is nothing of God; to the right, there is nothing for man.[125]

With the information-oriented character of modern culture, the tendency of modern preaching has been more to immerse in the historical and theological pole of the eternal Word to the denying of the contemporary situation. The challenge for incarnational preaching is even further amplified in an era of transition since the contemporary situation is changing. Incarnational efforts to touch the contemporary

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[125] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 28.

situation are now prone to represent the immediate past situation rather than the new contemporary situation. Continued development in the discipline of preaching requires very intentional practices designed to identify the communicator with postmodern culture to the degree that it becomes first nature, even above the modern culture.

The timeless incarnational character of the gospel is the first element addressed by Lesslie Newbigin when describing the culturally transcendent character of the gospel, "We have here, I suggest, a model of what is involved in the communication of the gospel across a cultural frontier. 1) The communication has to be in the language of the receptor culture."[126] What has long been known to be true of foreign mission is increasingly true for evangelism in American postmodern culture—the communicator must acquire, or be apprehended by, the new culture in order to communicate the gospel effectively. Immersion in mainstream culture creates a basis for common ground of experience giving the gospel message greater power to engage the audiences to which it is proclaimed.

The lifestyle of the preacher is instrumental in fostering an engaging connection to the messages preached. In addition to biblical and theological perspectives giving shape to what that entails, there are also practical aspects for how to foster a shared ethos of common cultural connection. This practical element is what Rob Bell describes as "orienting yourself into a preaching way of life."[127] Contrary to the modern professionalism of ministry, where preparation for preaching is ordinarily scheduled as

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[126] Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 5.

[127] Rob Bell, Lecture from "Preaching That Transforms," Fuller Theological Seminary, 7 July 2006.

time slots in the weekly schedule to glean material from books and formulate the *logos* of the message, the preaching way of life is much more holistic. At all times and in every circumstance there is an awareness of what is happening and a constant sense of "God stuff" going on. The preaching way of life learns to see it and notice it. Another way it is expressed is living in a "sacramental" path of life.

The "sacramental" attention is the first of four practical aspects recommended by Rob Bell for translating the preaching way of life into messages that engage listeners. The first aspect is what he terms "Radar." A preaching way of life lives with a constant radar that detects God and the ways he is working all the time.

The second practical aspect is what are called "Buckets." The idea with buckets is to be able to capture what is noticed. Even in this digital era the preaching way of life strongly advocates writing down everything that is noticed. "Buckets" utilize scraps of paper, napkins, bullet lists, even random fragments to collect everything, otherwise they pass through consciousness before being treated, then they are gone. When it comes to buckets Rob Bell instructs preachers to "get rid of your edit button." Begin by collecting everything, then later these can be evaluated for their merits.

Once buckets begin to grow with random material they expand and connect forming what is called "Chunks." The character of chunks is that they are collected ideas which begin to grow until they evolve and coalesce into a teaching. Chunks then become the basis of messages, not created in a week for a Sunday deadline, but emerging out of a way of life being lived.

The final practical aspect in a preaching way of life is what Rob Bell calls "Marinade." In the same way that marinade affects the flavor of food, the flavor of

material for messages is drastically affected by the time it remains immersed in living it first. In a day when preaching has fallen into the professional task of routine preparation and delivery, there is a dullness to the effect messages have for emotional connection. By contrast when messages overflow from a preaching way of life there is a greatly added power for engaging listeners.

Regardless of the names given to the preaching way of life, the preparation for preaching must include similar disciplines or practices that are aligned more directly with life as it is lived. Radar, Buckets, Chunks, and Marinade give a template for the practical elements of living a sacramental lifestyle. The preaching way of life is immersion in the culture. In doing so, the dated culture of a passing era will be noticeably upgraded to a more relevant culture of today and as a result, there will begin to overflow preaching that has the power to persuade listeners.

Designing Content to Engage Listeners

In the modern era, the field of homiletics focused great energy upon information for the design of content. Due to a centralized Christian voice in mainstream culture and a rising fascination with information as an end in itself, this approach enjoyed a high level of engagement from listeners when utilized in preaching. However, changes in culture have resulted in diminishing returns of engaged interest with information alone. In postmodern culture designing content to engage listeners requires greater attention to affective elements. Affective elements, even in the modern era, always heighten engagement; however, in the postmodern era these have become much more necessary to captivate interest at all.

Continued development in the discipline of preaching will require increased proficiency in determining the merits of both the *substance* and the *structure* of content for engaging listeners. Effective evangelistic preaching in postmodern culture must evaluate types of material presented; however, designing content to engage listeners includes an even more fundamental consideration of different modes of discourse. Changing culture has affected the way language, thoughts and ideas are exchanged in communication. Recognition of the time-bound limits of modern communication patterns is illustrated by Brian McLaren.

> Nobody speaks Old High German anymore. Nor does anyone speak King James English. But have we faced the fact that tomorrow's people won't speak our language either?
> I am not talking about our lexicon or our grammar, although they will, no doubt, change some, too. Rather, I am referring to our modes of discourse, our ways of arguing, our ways of structuring communications. I am referring to what makes a message boring or interesting, cogent or unconvincing, moving or cold, motivating or repulsive, funny or trite, overstated or understated, in good taste or in bad, delightful or ponderous.
> Will our words and concepts and methods of communication from the old world still work on the other side?[128]

It has previously been argued that persuasive communication, and perhaps, for that matter, postmodern communication, requires affective elements to be persuasive. The marginalization of the Christian voice in western culture is due to its entrenchment with modern patterns of communication, understood as overly based in information and technical scientific language and structures. By contrast, the emerging pattern of persuasive communication in mainstream culture is marked by story, metaphor, artistry,

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[128] Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 87.

imagery, and poetic language; and the indirect power of persuasion these have by means of engaging listeners.

The professional proficiency of designing content in the discipline of preaching regards the material being communicated beyond the substance of its information alone. The degree to which content engages listeners is potentially of equal or greater importance than the technical words and information contained. Proficiency in designing engaging content is enhanced by thorough evaluation of various types of material and the degree of affective engagement these possess. The variety of material resource available may be conceived of in categories as well as sub-category type lists.

For example, the category of "story" is well-established as a powerful technique for affective engagement, but there is a wide variety of possible types that meet the description of story. An historical occurrence story may begin with, "During the early days of John F. Kennedy's presidency.…" A personal experience story may begin with, "Several years ago while vacationing in Florida,…" A mythic fable story may begin with, "A tortoise and a hare were to run a race.…" Proficiency at designing engaging content utilizes a wide range of story types appropriately.

Another example is the category of "sayings" where the modern focus favored quotations, often with an academic citation of source, even when cumbersome for preaching. However, "sayings," as a category of content material encompasses a variety of types including: proverbs, zingers, limericks, verses, adages, bumper stickers, and advertising jingles. With sayings as with stories, proficiency at designing content utilizes the wide range of appropriate material available.

With the advancement of technology, as well as the evolution of culture, a variety of additional techniques have emerged for evangelistic preaching. Media projection has opened the way for pictures and imagery to be utilized in communication. Drama segments have gained popularity as a technique of communicating with affective engagement. Interactive participatory elements, beyond the well-worn "repeat after me" practice, have creatively increased in postmodern culture. The preponderance of wireless internet and personal electronic devices are presenting an entirely new frontier of possibility in communication. Varied techniques of engaging communication share the two characteristics of being relevant with emerging postmodern culture and possessing affective elements with listeners.

In the discipline of preaching, proficiency in designing content increases as the two prior described proficiencies of embracing assumptions and immersing in culture grow. The result is both proactive and reactive. The reactive mode is the ability to identify content that is very distinctly modern, whether in its substance or structure or both, and thus lacking cultural power to engage, or worse, hindering communication. The proactive mode is the ability to recognize the quality of content for inherent power to engage within the context of postmodern culture. The communicator's proficiency at designing content grows with the ability to evaluate the structure and substance of communication patterns.

For example, among elements of style addressed in the next section, several relate to the manner in which language is used. Rough narrative corresponds to postmodern culture better than polished points, prevalent in modern culture. In postmodern culture

poetic use of language is more engaging than prose, or technical language, which held

more power to engage in modern culture.

Regarding vocabulary used Haddon Robinson asserts, "Simple words also

contribute to a clear style." Further he adds,

> "Specialized vocabulary helps professionals with a discipline to communicate.
> But it becomes jargon when it is used unnecessarily or with people who do not
> understand it. While it takes three years or more to get through seminary, it can
> take you ten years to get over it."[129]

Clyde Fant further humorously chides the modern convention of using professional

sounding vocabulary, or what he sarcastically terms "Upper Garble."

> Never use a short word when a long one would be more impressive. This
> is the key to Upper Garble: Impressiveness. Language can conceal as well as
> reveal. When the preacher does not feel sufficiently impressive, Upper Garble
> can compensate for his insecurity. Short words can be used on every street
> corner; lengthy words are more complex and therefore more suggestive of the
> mysterious, the more-than-human, the profound. Upper Garble uses seem never
> to notice that Jesus spoke simply.[130]

Modern preaching has often reduced preaching to professionalism and, in doing so,

robbed it of much of its power. Richard Lisher develops this idea showing

professionalism as a vulnerability in modern preaching, "marked by a fascination with

specialization, process, credentials, and measurable outcomes, the net effect of which is

to undermine the minister's priestly and prophetic identity."[131] Further, he likens

ministers to other "users of words in our culture. News anchors, analysts, comics,

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[129] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 190.

[130] Fant, *Preaching For Today*, 148-149.

[131] Lisher, *The End of Words*, 30.

pundits, and savants: They are so smooth."[132] These he says, "are so professional that they are able to deliver gut-wrenching information without a hint of emotional investment, and all with an air of effortless familiarity."[133] Likewise, "ministers, too, tend to be performance-oriented in the way they view their work."[134]

For all the smooth objectivity of professionalism, in the end, preaching is meant to possess more. It is precisely the subjective element that sets preaching apart from other communication, giving it the emotional connection with the ability to engage listeners.

Preaching with Persuasive Style

Characteristic of postmodern culture is enhanced artistry. As noted earlier the cultural changes being described originated earliest with the artists—in the form of architects, songwriters, painters, poets, and storytellers whether authors, playwrights, or movie producers—before being embraced by university professors, then industry, then business and economics.[135] Religious circles seem to be among the later adopters of cultural change; however, among the preaching ministry within American evangelicalism at the turn of the twenty-first century there is growing evidence of attention being given to stylistic artistry in the discipline of preaching. In postmodern culture, the evaluation of communication in general will include consideration of emotive richness, even beyond

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[132] Ibid., 41.

[133] Ibid., 42.

[134] Ibid., 44.

[135]See p. 21 citation of Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism,* 16.

the mere veracity of information. Specifically, preaching will value stylistic artistry,

where creativity is an end in itself, for its power to engage.

The importance of style for persuasive communication has been well-established

with the discipline of preaching even prior to postmodern considerations. Several noted

modern authorities on preaching have emphasized the significance of presentation, even

to the point where content is understood not merely as equal to, but even dependent upon,

delivery for effective communication, much less effective persuasion. From one who has

been celebrated in the twentieth century for his recognized authority regarding the

content of preaching, Haddon Robinson says this about delivery:

> The effectiveness of our sermons depends on two factors: what we say and
> how we say it. Both are important. Apart from life-related, biblical content, we
> have nothing worth communicating; but without skillful delivery, we will not get
> that content across to a congregation.[136]

Beyond merely the effectiveness of adequately conveying content, there is also

validation, from biblical examples and patterns of preaching, that presentation style is as

much the substance of preaching as the content itself. This need for attention to style is

expressed by William Willimon,

> Some preachers are prejudiced against concerning themselves greatly with
> matters of style and delivery. Their theology of preaching tells them that the truth
> of God is self evident, needing no fancy frills or rhetorical presentation. This
> attitude overlooks the considerable range and skill of biblical communicators
> who, in the Scriptures, utilize remarkable literary creativity and diversity in their
> presentation of God. In preaching, style is substance, the way the truth is
> presented is part of the truth.[137]

Attention to style is a part of what was earlier referred to as incarnational

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[136]Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 201.

[137] Willimon, *Proclamation and Theology*, 42-43.

preaching by Clyde Fant. From this perspective "form, methodology, and delivery are nothing more, and nothing less, than the word of God taking on flesh and dwelling among us."[138] Further, the impact of the gospel depends heavily upon the style in which it is communicated. This is what was addressed by Paul Tillich,

> There is always a genuine decision against the gospel for those for whom it is a stumbling block. But this decision should not be dependent upon the wrong stumbling block, namely, the wrong way of our communication of the gospel -- our inability to communicate.[139]

Ironically, an effort to communicate the gospel may actually fail by eclipsing the gospel behind poor communication. Clyde Fant addresses this failure further by commenting on Paul Tillich's idea.

> In other words, Tillich is saying that communication does not mean persuasion; that is, even if a man says *no* to the gospel, it has still been communicated -- *if* it is the gospel he is rejecting, and not merely our presentation of it. But it has not been communicated if he never gets to the gospel at all because he has stumbled over my presentation of it.[140]

Continued development with the discipline of preaching in the postmodern era must address the possibility that a dated style of preaching may do more harm than simply disinteresting postmodern listeners. Due to the marginalization of the Christian voice in the mainstream culture, the modern assumptions and style of evangelistic preaching may prevent the gospel message even being heard for the barrier of an ineffective presentation.

Fred Craddock further addresses the importance of style in communication when

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[138] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, xiv.

[139] Paul Tillich as quoted in Clyde Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 49.

[140] Fant, *Preaching for Today*, 49.

he asks, "What is it that sustains the illusion that the Christian faith can proceed

effectively without giving prime time or our best intelligence to such lesser

considerations as method and style of communicating?"[141] After describing the fictions

that feed such an illusion he goes on to add,

> Suppose the subject is the Christian gospel; are we not to assume that the sheer weight of its significance is its own style, cutting a clear path straight to the hearer's mind and heart, and hence poorly served by any consideration that the speaker might give to appropriate form and method? As a matter of fact, many listeners entertain some suspicion of the speaker's sincerity if it is sensed that there has crept into the presentation a modicum of attention to the most effective method for communicating. Let the salesperson be lively and brilliant with a bar of soap, but let the person who speaks to and for the church be neither lively nor brilliant. There is no place for the charlatan in the kingdom![142]

Craddock's hyperbole is an effort to diffuse the idea that valid content alone has merit

apart from the manner of presentation in preaching the gospel. In order for the message

of the gospel to be adequately communicated, there must be consideration of the

appropriateness of its presentation. Appropriate presentation certainly includes correct

assumptions regarding the cultural context of listeners, but the correct correlation of style

with content is necessary as well. Matching elements of style with content is addressed

by Haddon Robinson,

> Your words may insist "This is important," but if your voice sounds flat and expressionless and your body stands limp, the congregation will not believe you. If you shake your fist at your hearers while you say in scolding tones, "What this church needs is more love and deep concern for one another!" the people in the pew will wonder whether you know about the love you are talking about. Because a vast amount of our preaching involves attitudes that either reinforce or contradict what our words proclaim, we dare not ignore delivery.[143]

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[141] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 7.

[142] Ibid., 8.

[143] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 204

Attention to delivery includes one's manner of expression according to two distinct considerations. The manner of expression reflects personal presentation as well as character of style. Personal presentation skill has long been understood to impact the effect of communication. While it is an oversimplification to equate increased charisma with greater impact, research indicates that elements of heightened expression are far more likely to help than hinder personal presentation. Bert Decker is noted for helping communicators increase the impact of personal presentation, simply by enhancing their powers of expression. Decker identified those skill areas within one's ability to adjust that most affect the personal impact of delivery in communication. These he condenses down to eight skills listed under two categories defined as "The Eye Factor" and "The Energy Factor."

The Eye Factor:
   1. Eye Communication
   2. Posture and Movement
   3. Dress and Appearance
   4. Gestures and the Smile
The Energy Factor:
   5. Voice and Vocal Variety
   6. Words and Nonwords (The Pause)
   7. Listener Involvement
   8. Humor[144]

The proficiency required for effective evangelistic preaching includes the very practical element of personal presentation. In addition to personal presentation, the character of style is also a critical element affecting the manner of expression. Especially in the transition between the modern era and the postmodern era, there has been no change in the importance of style for effective communication—style continues to matter

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[144] Decker, *You've Got to Be Believed to be Heard*, 79.

greatly. However, there is a contrast between the two periods relative to the character of

style for effective communication. Here, as with other topics previously, the contrast is

limited due to the emergent state of postmodern culture. Perhaps this is why the term

"hunch" is used as Brian McLaren seeks to contrast character of styles for effective

communication in postmodern culture. In a simplified contrast he offers eleven hunches

for more effective preaching and liturgy in the postmodern context.

1. Weak and soft is better than loud and hard
2. Intrigue is better than clarity
3. Participatory is better than impressive
4. Warm is better than cool, or hot
5. "Abduction" is better than deduction, or induction
6. Ancient-future is better than traditional, or contemporary
7. Rough narrative is better than polished points
8. Missional is better than universal
9. "Dirty" or gritty is better than excellent
10. Reverent is better than relevant
11. Poetry is better than prose[145]

Continued development in the discipline of preaching must not only be concerned

with style, but more specifically the character of style, for its power to engage. The

above list of hunches reveals the general character of effective communication in

postmodern culture. There is a reaction to what is distinctly modern. Modern

communication is not necessarily ineffective; however, in the emerging culture of the

postmodern era there is a "pendulum swing" toward patterns that are more engaging.

Hegelian dialectical process would label modern culture as thesis and postmodern culture

as antithesis, in the evolution toward eventual synthesis. The result is a contrast that

appears as the opposite of, or instead of. In actuality, as has been previously stated, the

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[145] McLaren, Brian, Lecture from "Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix" Fuller Theological Seminary, 28 October 2004.

contrast should be understood as an improvement upon, or extension beyond, modern

characteristics. The examples in the list above reveal that communication is more

engaging, or "better," if it is not marked by the well-worn, tired, over-used patterns of a

passing era. One distinct characteristic of effective communication in postmodern culture

is improvement upon modern elements. This is demonstrated by use of the term *better* in

the list of hunches above.

In contract to the sterile empiricism characteristic of the modern scientific era,

postmodern culture reflects an increased measure of stylistic artistry and creativity.

Previously reference was made to the three types of language used in religion as

described by C.S. Lewis, including scientific language, ordinary language, and poetic

language.[146] The contrast between modern and postmodern communication is described

in terms of prose and poetry by Walter Brueggemann,

> By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even
> pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean
> rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves like Bob Gibson's fast ball,
> that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise,
> abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a
> situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the
> name *preaching*.[147]

Evangelistic preaching, as persuasive communication, must not only be true to the

character of proclamation, but must also be engaging. In the postmodern culture,

effective communication requires a greater level of attention to stylistic feature than in

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[146] See page 53.

[147] Brueggemann, Walter. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation.*
(Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 3.

the modern era in order to be engaging. Proficiency in the discipline of preaching requires a mastery of presentation style for effective persuasion in postmodern culture.

Evangelistic preaching is described in 2 Cor. 5:11 is an endeavor to persuade others. The actual response to such efforts is ultimately spiritual in nature and must account for the non-human element of God's work in the lives and hearts of people. Some have used this reality to excuse any diligence at all with human efforts at developing proficiency. These will cite Martin Luther's inspirational statement, "God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line." These will appeal to selective biblical references such as Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."

Without denying the truth of such thoughts, there is however a stronger validity for the partnership of human effort together with God as a much more ordinary path to effectiveness. What God can do, is able to do, and does do is not necessarily the only or even most compelling model of responsible action. Technically, it is true that Jesus was able to make bread from stones, but more often he would break the loaves made by the baker and sold at the local market, and brought forward by a young boy as a catalyst for his miraculous work. A similar stewardship may be described in other spheres as well. Though technically Jesus can miraculously pull a coin from a fish's mouth to pay a tax, he more typically suggests rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Evangelism will always rely on the mysterious, even miraculous, element, but not to the exclusion of human effort, human understanding, and the initiative to make wise use of the world's mammon (or latest findings in the field of psychology and persuasion).

Evangelistic Preaching actually merits a level of spiritual stewardship not to neglect the resources that inform and even enhance effective communication and persuasion. For this reason there must be an initiative on the part of evangelistic preachers to develop proficiency in patterns of communication that are effective in the postmodern culture.

CONCLUSION

History produced in the modern era an information age in a predominately

Christian culture, which gave rise to Soren Kirkegaard's commentary, "There is no lack

of information in a Christian land; something else is lacking, and this is a something

which the one cannot directly communicate to the other."[148] At the threshold of the

postmodern era it is precisely the "something else" that Kirkegaard referred to that is

most needed for evangelistic preaching. No longer is the land Christian, but even so, it is

not information that is lacking; it is something else.

From the outset of the Christian mission, and at every era in its history, preaching

has held a central place for the propagation of the faith through evangelism.

Communicating the message of the gospel is a timeless essential of the Christian faith.

History and theology, as well as a number of biblical texts, continually reinforce the

centrality of preaching to the Christian mission in the world. Perhaps because of its

significance, emphasis upon the message has eclipsed the equally significant element of

the presentation.

In the current era of dramatic transition the art of preaching has become more

demanding than ever before. No longer is it sufficient to prepare messages with sound,

coherent thought, but this must be supplemented with the character and experience that

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[148] Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 3.

validate the things being said. The message needs emotional connection in order to engage listeners.

Preaching in changing times creates a problem for effectiveness. What had worked so well in past generations is no longer accomplishing the same effect. The preaching ministry in today's North American Church has reached a caliber unmatched in previous generations with the aid of technology, visual media, and accessible information. Yet for all the excellence in preaching, American churches are in decline and effectiveness in evangelism is waning. Much attention has been drawn recently to the lack of new conversion in the Church, where numerical growth generally represents transferring members more than new conversions. Even apart from the missional character of the gospel toward "unreached" peoples, simply the effect upon the "already convinced" is limited in accomplishing transformation. There is an alarming malaise upon the North American Church that earnestly calls for attention.

A plausible explanation for these troubling issues is the dramatic paradigm shift occurring between the modern world and the emerging postmodern world. The current era is a hinge point in history where over five hundred years of modern culture is giving way to postmodern modes of thinking and expression. Unfortunately, in transitional times, it is easier to diagnose what is not working, or is waning in effectiveness, than to predict what is becoming a new solution. While only time will prove what emerges as effective in postmodern culture, it is the task of conscientious preachers to cease perpetuating a failing approach and exert initiative for exploring solutions.

Aristotle long ago identified three elements of rhetoric: *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. *Logos* is that element in communication based in logic or reason, often referring to the

content of the message itself. *Pathos* is that element based in the emotion or feeling evoked in the audience of the message. *Ethos* is that element based in the character of the speaker within the context of shared community. Throughout the centuries this template has fostered a resonance for effective communication.

A case is routinely made that preaching in the modern era has focused upon *logos*, the reason-based content of ideas and meaning represented in clearly defined words, systematic outlines, and theological propositions. In itself, such an emphasis makes an excellent contribution to effective communication. However, the inadvertent fault may be elevating *logos* to the neglect of *pathos* and *ethos*. One of the early indicators of effective communication in the postmodern context is that *pathos* and *ethos* are as important as, if not more important than, the *logos* exalted in the modern era. In preaching, the spheres of *pathos* and *ethos* are much more directly aligned with emotional connection than with cognitive information.

The challenge presented by the current state of preaching is twofold. First is to wean preaching from its dependence on the wordy theological propositions of *logos* so entrenched in the modern era. Second is to explore paths for inducing much more engagement into the messages being preached. Modern preaching can become so centered upon the time-honored propositions of *logos* that it even lacks awareness of a failing connection with listeners. Void of *pathos* and *ethos* the message may be heard repeatedly with a warmth of appreciation, but with no transforming affect in the lives of hearers.

At present, evangelistic preaching regularly struggles to effect any persuasion in the lives of hearers. It is very difficult to generate life change when the message has

become dulled by familiarity or weary disinterest. There is a need to free the message

from entrapment in modern constructs, so entrenched that if not actually incorrect (as is

sometimes the case) they at least have lost their power to stir the spirit. Preaching today

must discover innovative approaches to engage listeners beyond well-stated propositions

if it is to persuade unbelievers. In the words of Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson,

preaching must "use language in a way that speaks not only to our hearers' minds, but

also to their hearts."[149]

      The problems with effective communication are far more complex than merely

the content of messages being preached. With an eye toward solutions in times such as

these, Richard Lisher offers an insightful suggestion, "It's not better performances the

church needs, but truer characters."[150] Truer characters elicit increased engagement,

resulting from greater attention to *ethos* and *pathos* than *logos*. Truer characters

represent the idea that preaching is an overflow of a life lived, especially immersed in the

common culture of listeners. Truer characters answer P.T. Forsyth's axiom that "the cure

for pulpit dullness is not brilliance but reality."[151] The dullness P. T. Forsyth referred to

may be of a different type than the dulled effect of preaching in the current era, but the

solution is the same. The solution will not be found in the *logos* of the message, but in

the *pathos* and *ethos* of emotional connection. In a period of transition from the modern

era to a postmodern era, effective communication will require that greater measures of

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[149] Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching That Connects: Using Journalistic Techniques to Add Impact* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 17.

[150] Richard Lisher, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 44.

[151] P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1980), p. 91. as quoted by Lisher, *The End of Words*, 114.

pathos and *ethos* be brought to bear on preaching. The initiative for doing so rests with developed proficiency on the part of communicators.

It is a bold assertion to claim that over five centuries of modern preaching has created an imbalance which deprives preaching today of effectiveness for evangelism. However, Scripture presents a perspective weighted heavily upon the personal connection with listeners as equally important as the message (which is presumed to be more than adequate in its own merits). As a result, there are tensions to be maintained between the content and the connection in evangelistic preaching. Preaching that engages listeners keeps tension between objectivity and subjectivity, between strength and weakness, and between speaking and living. In contrast to strong, objective, empirical content, there is a much more ready connection through subjective, real-to-life, common experience.

In Matthew 10 when Jesus sent his disciples out to "proclaim the message," he instructed them, "Do not worry about what you will say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say" (Matt. 10:19, NIV). It would be difficult to imagine a modern seminary homiletics course advocating such an approach. Yet in this instance, it seems that the message itself is of less concern than the messenger. In relationship to preaching, it introduces the tension between informational objectivity and the subjectivity of the personal life of the preacher.

When the message being conveyed is regarded as timeless and universal, as in the case of the gospel, it would seem that objectivity is the highest aim of communicating it—by stripping away the layers of culturalization to elicit the nugget of pure truth. This has been a preoccupation of the modern approach, sifting out theological propositions to stand alone apart from cultural trappings. Unfortunately, this pursuit actually represents a

departure from the original intent and formation of the gospel message. The gospel, even the incarnation of Christ himself, was in its first case translated into the time and place of a specific cultural setting. The gospel is simultaneously objective and subjective— relevant to the distinctives of a specific culture while at the same time transcending cultural trappings with a universal relevance. Leslie Newbigin highlights this characteristic by saying, "The Christ who is presented in Scripture for our believing is Lord over all cultures, and his purpose is to unite all of every culture to himself in a unity that transcends, without negating, the diversities of culture."[152] The mission of perpetuating the gospel into all the world rests entirely upon this characteristic, that it is "infinitely translatable" to every culture.

The challenge this presents for preaching in a postmodern context is to escape the rigid "constructs" with the modern emphasis on historical reconstruction, analysis of words, and objective propositions in favor of subjective relevance to the specific narratives of any given time and place. Richard Lisher indicates this shift when he quotes Luke Timothy Johnson who says, "[preaching] must become less preoccupied with the world that produced scripture and learn again how to live in a world scripture produces."[153] There is an element of subjectivity in preaching that is essential to the transformation it is intended to make. The pathos of direct relevance to time and place is what gives the gospel its power to transform the lives of its hearers.

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[152] Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 149.

[153] Lisher, *The End of Words,* 52.

Subjectivity in preaching might ordinarily sound like dangerous ground, and would be were it not for the fact that such an approach is actually truer to the message and the character of Christ himself. The early preachers in the Christian faith were quite comfortable with the subjective elements applied in the message. The words of John in his first epistle reflect this familiar refrain. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:3, NIV). The early preachers were eyewitnesses who were communicating in first person what they had experienced in their own lives. When the message is an overflow of the messenger's own life it conveys *pathos* and *ethos* with an effectiveness that cannot be achieved by *logos* alone.

Erwin McManus describes the contrast between modern overemphasis upon objectivity and the heightened effectiveness of subjectivity by highlighting stories and personal experiences in preaching.

> When I was in seminary, I was encouraged to hold back on sharing my personal experiences. It was considered more appropriate to tell historical stories, stories of ancient Christian leaders, and generic illustrations that didn't involve my life. It was inappropriate to bring your personal life into the message. The focus was on exegesis and application. I am so thankful I never took this advice. It would have catapulted me into a place of irrelevance within the vast emerging culture[154]

What is reflected in McManus' experience with preaching illustrates the waning effectiveness of modern methods of communication. McManus's words also highlight the significance of engaging listeners to regain effectiveness at evangelistic preaching in postmodern culture. More subtle, though, in McManus's thought is what is reflected about the initiative communicators must take to regain an effective voice in postmodern

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[154] McManus, *Unstoppable Force*, 141.

culture. The initiative is twofold, requiring a willingness and readiness to let go of the past as well as an openness and eagerness to embrace the future.

Postmodern modes of communication are less information driven and more affect driven. The success of information-driven evangelistic preaching in the modern era resulted in an entrenched method of outlines, propositions, and objective content to present a *logos* of sound reason. An insistence upon such a method must be released in order to regain the same effectiveness in the culture of twenty-first century American Evangelicalism. A method must be embraced more typical of biblical preaching, where narrative *pathos* and *ethos* drive an engaging connection with listeners. In twenty-first century postmodern culture, it is this latter methodology that holds affective power to persuade. The difference is keenly evident in the arts, media, and advertising; and increasingly evident in education, industry, and business. Evangelistic preaching is faced with the challenge of undergoing a similar evolution to gain a more credible and effective voice, much less regain a more central position within mainstream culture. As preachers take the initiative for developing greater power of engagement in their presentation, there will emerge a renewed level of effectiveness, necessary for the Christian voice to resume a shared place in the cultural dialogue of postmodern America.

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