

Preaching Parables to Postmoderns

Sample Reading from: www.BrianStiller.com

Preface

Preachers, in their call to preach the Scriptures, are not only charged with the responsibility of speaking its truth but of speaking in such a way that people of this age and culture understand. To do this, the preacher builds a bridge between today's people and the gospel of both testaments. For some, this task is more difficult than for others. Preaching to those living in an inner-city housing project is far removed from an outpost mission in the two-thirds world. Each community has its own way of thinking and attaches different values to symbols of its own making.

For those called preach to a generation raised on MTV and late-night comedians or those rooted in various economic cultures—from government—sponsored jobs overseen by union bosses to entrepreneurial dot-com companies—or generations stretching from high school students to “freedom fifty-fivers,” the task is enormous. When one adds to that the complexity of a radical shift in underlying intellectual and cultural assumptions, the task of preaching becomes even more complicated.

Although we believe that the Word by its nature is powerful in reshaping lives, we still wonder how we can meet the multiple needs of a highly pluralistic and diverse people, some of whom have been raised on Bible stories and others who cannot tell a biblical saying from an honored maxim. No longer is biblical literacy to be assumed. No longer can it be taken for granted that those who attend worship accept basic theological affirmations. It is to this mixed crowd that a preacher comes weekly.

Therefore, one of the most significant questions that preachers ask in this changing and radically secular age is, *How are people to understand the Bible if they have less and less knowledge of it or its stories?*

It is not only critical for preaching ministers to search for strategic ways to appeal to contemporary generations, it is also important to find ways of speaking the biblical message so those who are biblically illiterate can understand. As well, if people do not read or understand the Bible, the task of the preacher is made even more demanding—for the loss of biblical knowledge leads to an unfamiliarity not only with biblical names and events but also with its underlying ideals and moral impulses.

Along with this loss of biblical understanding, the assumptions of modernity are challenged by a postmodern paradigm that reworks René Descartes' starting point of reason as being the foundation for discovering truth to include intuition and experience as lenses through which truth can also be discovered.

One result of this reworking of the starting point of knowing has been a blooming of interest in ideas loosely called “spirituality.” While this may at times lead to all sorts of excesses, it has inadvertently opened doors to Christian faith, providing opportunities for new initiatives in

Christian outreach and evangelization.

The common form of public discourse that cuts across all lines of ethnicity, culture, economic or social status, age, or gender is the story, be it modern or postmodern. Stories grip the mind and heart and not only provide a vision of God but are themselves the stuff of the Spirit, by which the work of our redeeming God is done. In short, we can speak to a people, sometimes suspicious, sometimes bored, and often intellectually lazy, with an approach and content that sneaks past usual forms of resistance.

In short, it is important that preachers understand this shift in cultural thinking and become adept at using Jesus' parables as windows through which the interested and even the disinterested can peer. This book is designed to speak to such issues.

Chapter One

POSTMODERNITY

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," commented Dorothy to Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*. Living in the early years of the twenty-first century, we might experience a similar sense of dislocation. As Dorothy realized something had changed, so critical writers of the past quarter-century remind us that the assumptions of much of the twentieth century—what is called "modernity"¹—are not as they once were. The shift—called "postmodernity"—is away from previous philosophical underpinnings to something quite different, ideas that fundamentally alter how we think about what is true. Although there is a growing debate over what these words mean and their respective values, there is a widely held consensus that the theories of the modern era are no longer taken as the only basis on which truth is to be learned or life is to be lived.

Here I want to point out the shift from modernity to postmodernity and to examine the meaning of postmodernity for purposes of preaching.

The Nature of Change

The term *postmodern* is a framework for thinking about our contemporary world.² It also is a simple way of saying that the world has changed. For our purposes in preaching the question we want to have answered is this: What has changed and to what degree has that change affected the way people may think and respond to the Scriptures and thus preaching?

That we live in a world referred to as *postmodern* is not to say that what we have known as *modern* no longer exists. Historical movements do not move from one totally encompassing idea to another. Rather, they flow from one into the other. There is never a total end to one and a clear-cut beginning to another. We do not wake up one day with life having so changed that what has been no longer is. Life changes over time, and as it does, society gradually comes to think differently about its world. What emerges stands on the shoulders of what went before—or, to put it another way, the plant of this age grows out of the soil and ingredients of the past, which in turn become the hubris of the next stage of growth.

What concerns us here is the nature of that change and the resulting changes in values and priorities. In preaching, if a congregation is rural, made up of those whose daily work is in agriculture or who at least are surrounded by metaphors of that world, we will search for different ways of speaking than if the church is made up of stockbrokers and middle- to high-end corporate managers. Because these groups see life through different cultural glasses and use different figures of speech, the sermon must use what helps congregants connect to the scriptural passage.

Given this, the question is, In what way does this generation—be they farmers or stockbrokers—differ in language from the former generation? Answering this question is an important task of the preacher.

The Premodern and Modern Ages

From first-century Palestine through to the seventeenth century, revelation was the primary means by which life was to be interpreted. During this *premodern* age the church—at least in the Western world—dominated. The early church—reshaped by the Roman Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the culturally accepted faith—became the ultimate authority in the Holy Roman Empire. Exploration, intellectual inquiry, and political rule found authority within the church. That changed during the Renaissance, “the grandmother of modernity and mother of the Enlightenment” (Grenz 1996, 60). René Descartes (1596–1650) looked for a philosophical starting point other than God, an assertion that inevitably raised the question, “Where did God come from?” Descartes’ formula for determining the starting point for philosophical reflection was, *Cogito, ergo sum*: “I think, therefore I am.” This simple but profound assertion brought into play a new way of seeing life that profoundly influenced Western thinking, by building its starting point of inquiry on rationality rather than revelation.

The wave of change continued as Martin Luther challenged the absolute and encompassing power of the church by asserting that we come to Christ by faith, not by the mediating influence of the church and her appointees. This wall of the premodern age began to crack as religion started to lose its dominant role in the life of the people.

Reason, an idea Descartes borrowed from Augustine, became the cornerstone of the modern era. Reason established the rules and criteria for understanding reality. Ideas were tested through the grid of rationality. Only by reason, it was argued, could humans understand themselves and their surrounding cosmos and in turn re-create the world for purposes of human betterment.³ The way of doing this varied from philosopher to philosopher.⁴ While reason was the operating formula, *faith in self* was its underlying assumption. “I exist, therefore . . .” puts not only the emphasis but the focus of trust on “self.” This “I” can be in isolation as the autonomous self or it can be in community, but in the end there is nothing beyond to which one can appeal for help. In effect, God was replaced as the primary source of truth. With God set aside and self now at the center, it was natural to assert the potential of self. Anything previously regarded as true was to be examined through the new microscope of reason. Not only was the self regarded as having potential, but it was exalted in its moral capabilities. With God less and less in the picture for both the human self and the surrounding cosmos, the world was seen more as a machine, with the tragic result that humanity became

but a cog in the machine of a God-absent world.⁵

The principled framework of the modern age was reason. Within that framework developed a confidence that humans could change the world by understanding it. This rested on the assumption that *nature* was itself orderly, to be discerned by laws that were not only intelligible but, by way of human reason and ingenuity, could be controlled and subdued.

In effect, human reason had “dethroned the reverence for external authority as an arbiter of truth that had characterized the medieval and Reformation period” (Grenz 1996, 68). Appealing to the Bible or church authorities no longer sufficed. The human self could make claims without the need to refer to something outside of human reason. Nature was understood as *autonomous*.

Progress was seen as inevitable: Life was moving forward and upward. The end result would be freedom, happiness, and the well-being of people living within an orderly society. Given the barbarous nature of the Middle Ages and the modernist view that the previous age had been controlled by religious superstition, which resulted in its many wars and brutal practices, optimism flourished in this newfound Age of Reason.

Modernity had its most serious impact upon religion; indeed, it challenged the very basis of Christian faith, which had as its starting point the eternal God. Nature was seen as antithetical to revelation. What one believed by “revelation” was not to be taken seriously. Belief was regarded as “personal.” It was seen as not being scientifically true and, therefore, illegitimate in having a place in public, being confined to the privacy of one’s community or mind. In that way religion and faith were “privatized” by modern thought.

Not surprisingly, belief in the Bible was undermined and by none more devastatingly than Charles Darwin and his view of evolutionary naturalism in which science was seen to be the explanation for all of life, including human origin.⁶ The Bible, by contrast, because of its claims about the origin of life which could not pass the scrutiny of empirical observation, was judged to be myth and superstition at best, and blatantly false at worst.

Modernity’s vision was based on a trust that knowledge would liberate people from tyranny even as science was to overcome nature, freeing civilizations from want, wars, and the unpredictability of the surrounding world. Organization would oversee societies and economies, liberating society from “the irrationalities of myth, religious superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures” (Harvey, 12) The modern era “was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains” (13).

In the early years of the twentieth century the modernist and optimistic mood of inevitability and invincibility was punctured.⁷ Death camps, death squads, and death bombs—tools of modernity—showed how vulnerable was this underbelly of optimism. Lurking behind the well-honed assumptions of modernity was the age-old human impulse to oppress and dominate. Nothing much had changed. The regimes of Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, or Pol Pot made that clear. The awe-inspiring notions of fraternity, liberty, and equality that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were found wanting where it really mattered. The lust to dominate and control had not been dissolved by the rhetoric of

universal brotherhood.

The Postmodern Experiment

Postmodernism, the child of modernity, incubated during the first half of the twentieth century and was born in the latter part of the twentieth century. Some postmodern ideas grew of modern notions while others—in almost an angry sort of way—were a backlash against modernity’s triumphal assertions. Douglas Coupland, who first used the term “Generation X” to describe a late twentieth century generation, expresses his inner struggle in the last page of *Life after God*.

Now—here is my secret: I speak to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love (Coupland, 360).

It can also be heard in philosophy from the angry words of Friedrich Nietzsche. The twentieth-century German philosopher, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which the mythical figure Zarathustra preached the death of God and the emergence of the superman, “spelled the beginning of the end of modernity and the inauguration of the gestation period of postmodernity” (Grenz 1996, 83). In *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, Nietzsche wrote:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphism—in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins (Nietzsche, 46–47).

Educators and leaders of today were influenced by the antiestablishment movement that flourished in the late 1960s. Antagonistic to the scientific and bureaucratic structures of centralized power, countercultural movements reacted to the dominance of bureaucracies and governments. Students, aided by drugs and financed by the wealth of parents, spilled into the streets of many cities in Europe and North America angrily demanding a deconstruction of the establishment. Technology, a symbol of the modern-scientific mind, became the means that enabled folk heroes of the 1960s and 1970s—philosophers speaking often by way of music—to spread their anti-Western/anti-Enlightenment rhetoric. Disparaging capitalistic and political imperialism symbolized by a dishonest president (Nixon) and a foreign war going bad (Vietnam), the power of this antimodern force helped bring about a world reshaping that today we call postmodernity.

How did this turn so quickly? What brought it about? As God had been questioned as the source of truth in the late years of the premodern era, in the late years of the modern era reason got its turn. *Rationality* as the cornerstone of the modern era was challenged as, centuries before, *revelation* had been challenged.

Characteristics of Postmodernity

The essential ingredients of postmodernity point out the underlying shift taking place today. These include the following.

1. Reason, the fundamental building block of modern thought, is rejected as the only prime means to discover truth. Philosophical thought has opened the door to increasingly considering experience and intuition as being avenues to truth. This has led to seeing truth as not that which is true *out there*, but that which is *interior*, so that self both defines and articulates what the self believes is true.
2. Postmodernity also rejects the modern assertion that truth is objective.⁸ For a postmodernist, truth is the construct of the one making the declaration. Meaning is but a human phenomenon. The conversation of three umpires outlines three ways of viewing truth. One says, “There are balls and strikes, and I call them as they are.” The other responds, “No, balls and strikes are as I see them.” The postmodern disagrees. “They ain’t nothing ’til I call them.”⁹ The working phrase is “personal perspective” and not “true truth,” a frequent phrase of Francis Schaeffer, a Christian apologist of the 1970s. Because experience and opinion shape what we hold to be true, “truth” has been compromised by the very nature of one making the assertion. It may be true for one person, the argument goes, but who is to say it is true for another?¹⁰
3. Postmoderns dismiss authorities who, by their positions of power, use “truth” to oppress and advance their personal agendas. History, because it is written by the conquerors, is denied as being an accurate description of what took place. As history is rejected, “political correctness” becomes the mantra. Since no one can presume that their narrative is anything other than their own, there is no narrative that can presume to speak for anyone but the one making the assertion. The growing paranoia over keeping within one’s own verbal or presumptive space becomes a preoccupation.
4. As objective truth is rejected so is the metanarrative—a grand and sweeping story that gives meaning to life and serves to answer the larger questions of human existence. Thus the Bible—with its wide landscape of the history of God and creation, a story explaining the human saga—is dismissed. Again, the assumption is that the narrative was written to serve those in power.
5. As truth is relative, all ideas are considered to be of equal value. Allan Bloom notes a deep conviction that “relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth . . . is the great insight of our times” (Bloom 26).
6. In populist terms, postmodernity is driven by a concern for the therapeutic. If personal well-being is all important, then finding ways to shape one’s self into well-being is the

preoccupying concern. As Roger Lundin comments, “A therapeutic culture is one in which questions of ultimate concern—about the nature of the good, the meaning of truth and the existence of God—are taken to be unanswerable and hence, in some fundamental sense, insignificant” (“The Pragmatics of Postmodernity,” in Phillips and Okholm, 31). Alasdair MacIntyre agrees: “Truth has been displaced as a value and replaced by psychological effectiveness” (MacIntyre, 31).

This brief outline of postmodern thought provides a basis on which to consider the role of the parables in preaching. But first let us examine the nature of the literary parabolic form.

Notes

1. Modernity—terms include *The Enlightenment* and *The Age of Reason*—refers to the modern era, beginning with René Descartes’ maxim, up to the early 1970s. “This age of reason . . . embraced classicism with its order and rationality. . . . Reason alone, so they thought, may now replace the reliance on the supernatural born out of the ignorance of ‘unenlightened times’” (Veith, 33).
2. “Postmodernism . . . holds that the so-called world that emerged intellectually from the sixteenth century onward has come to an end at the close of the twentieth century as surely as the so-called medieval era [premodern] early on had its day” (Carl F. H. Henry, “Postmodernism: The New Spectre?” in Dockery, 36).
3. “The Enlightenment project . . . took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it . . . would provide the means to Enlightenment ends” (Harvey, 27).
4. “Descartes highlighted the rationalist standard of clear and distinct ideas, the sciences wielded empiricist criteria, the Hegelians placed their hope in Spirit’s progress in history, and the Romantics appealed to an immediate pre-reflective intuition. These criteria provided a universal foundation for the disciplines” (Phillips and Okholm, 12).
5. Deists taught that, while God was necessary to get life started, it is not necessary that God have any continuing place in life (Veith, 34).
6. “Darwin’s theory of evolution challenged romanticism just as it did Christianity. Darwin showed that nature was not the realm of harmony and goodness that the romantics idealized” (Veith, 37).
7. “Modern history is turning out to be embarrassing precisely on the basis of its own optimistic axioms. Not some theory but actual modern *history* is what is killing the ideology of modernity. I need only mention Auschwitz, Mylai, Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, *Hustler* magazine . . . All of these point to the depth of failure of the modern consciousness” (Oden 1990, 51).
8. “Since all claims to truth are merely social constructions, truth is simply an honorific term used to describe our best guess at the way things are” (Steven Bouma-Prediger, “Yearning for

Home,” in Westphal, 172).

9. “Foucault’s [an early voice of postmodern thought] connection between knowledge and power marks the postmodern end of the road that Francis Bacon charted at the beginning of the Enlightenment. . . . Human knowledge does not merely allow us to exercise power over nature . . . more significantly, knowledge is violence” (Grenz 1996, 133).

10. “Knowledge is no longer seen as absolute truth; rather, knowledge is seen in terms of rearranging information into new paradigms. Human beings *construct* models to account for their experiences. These models—whether worldviews or scientific theories—are ‘texts,’ constantly being revised” (Veith, 57).

ISBN: Fortress Press ISBN 0-800-3713-5