

**THE PREACHING PRACTICES
OF EVANGELICAL PASTORS
IN THE NEWER CHURCHES
OF LOUDOUN COUNTY, VIRGINIA**

by

David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA
Leesburg, Virginia

A MINISTRY PROJECT / DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

MAY 2006

ABSTRACT

This study considers first the problem of why new evangelical churches in Loudoun County, Virginia, were not able to sustain numerical growth: second, it explores the relationship, if any, between church growth and the preaching practices of these pastors. The purpose of the study is to explore the preaching practices of these pastors to discover if there is any discernible relationship between the type of preaching employed and the growth or non-growth of these churches.

The literature review focuses on changes in preaching as the culture shifts from modernity to postmodernity, with attention given to recommendations concerning how preaching can remain effective in a postmodern context. The findings that came out of the research demonstrate clear patterns as the pastors interviewed for the study answered the following research questions:

- What are the preaching practices of evangelical pastors in Loudoun County?
- Why are these the preaching practices of evangelical pastors in Loudoun County?
- Where did evangelical pastors in Loudoun County learn these preaching practices?
- What models are evangelical pastors in Loudoun County using in their preaching?

Finally, the conclusions drawn from the literature review and the research project highlight the need for pastors ministering in a postmodern context to consider expository preaching, blended with apologetics. Postmodern people respond positively to detailed explanations of what Scripture says, coupled with why it says it.

SUMMARY OF STUDY

This study began by considering the problem of why new evangelical churches in Loudoun County, Virginia, were not able to sustain numerical growth and to explore if there was any relationship between church growth and the preaching practices of these evangelical pastors. Based on my own experiences and observations as a pastor of one of these new churches, I believed that one of the primary reasons newer churches were not able to sustain their initial growth was a dearth of systematic expository preaching through books of the Bible. Going into this project, I believed that the topical preaching that prevailed in most of these churches was hindering church growth for two reasons.

First, people simply were not being taught the content of Scripture in enough depth to be able to formulate and adopt a Christian worldview that would enable them to grow into spiritual maturity.

Second, the dominant population of Loudoun County, Virginia, is one of people in their 20s and 30s (often referred to as “baby busters,” “Generation X,” or “postmoderns”) who have uncritically adopted the tenets and presuppositions of postmodernism. Yet I believed that most of the newer churches here were using a model of ministry and preaching that was designed to reach people in their 40s and 50s (“baby boomers” or “moderns”), which meant that many churches were using a preaching model based on assumptions that postmoderns implicitly and inherently rejected.

Therefore my goals were to discover what the preaching practices of evangelical pastors in the newer churches in Loudoun County, Virginia, actually were. First, I wanted to determine what style of preaching they employed, what process they went through in preparing to preach and in actually delivering the sermon, why they had chosen that particular style of preaching, and what influence, if any, the postmodern culture had on choosing their style of preaching.

Second, I wanted to determine what impact their style of preaching had on the numerical and spiritual growth of their church members. I looked at where they learned these preaching styles and who influenced them most in their preaching.

Finally, I wanted to encourage them to consider preaching expository apologetic sermons as an effective way to reach postmodern people today.

To start, I researched a variety of written material that would give me insight into these concerns. I read several hundred articles and dozens of books to try to understand what people of all different theological traditions were writing about preaching today. I also tried to read extensively on how postmodernism was affecting the church today, with particular emphasis on how it influenced preaching.

Having completed the review of the literature, I set out to interview twelve evangelical pastors of newer churches in Loudoun County, Virginia. Each of these churches has been planted in the last twelve years. All of the pastors interviewed were between 35 and 52 years old and each of them had significant ministry experience. Most of them had Master of Divinity degrees.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The initial findings of my literature review supported my assumptions that much of what had been written about preaching was written with modernity in mind, regardless of the claims made by the author. Likewise, most of the criticism directed towards preaching was targeted toward a seeker-sensitive model of preaching that had been created specifically for baby boomers, now in their 40s and 50s, and was largely ineffective at reaching postmoderns.

My research largely confirmed the results of a survey Robert Webber conducted which showed:

There seems to be a general reaction against the contemporary style of worship developed in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. 87% of those surveyed listed ‘entertainment’ worship as a style that least interested them. 48% registered a negative attitude toward contemporary worship and the style of music generally associated with it.

On the other hand, the survey demonstrated that the twenty-something evangelical leaders of tomorrow are characterized by the following interests:

1. The strongest and deepest desire of the twenty-something worshiper is to have a genuine encounter with God (88%).
2. This longing for an encounter with God is not merely individualistic, but one that takes place within the context of genuine community (88%).
3. It follows that there is a high concern to recover depth and substance in worship (87%).
4. There is a deep desire to return to a more frequent and meaningful experience of communion. Here is where a deep, substance-filled encounter with God is most fully experienced on the personal level (86%).
5. Worship in the future will be more participatory. Worship is not a lecture or a concert done *for* us. Authentic worship is done *by* us. We are the players; God is the audience (73%).
6. Another significant way we are encountered by God shows up in the demand for challenging sermons (69%) and more use of Scripture (49%).¹

¹ Robert Webber, “The Crisis of Evangelical Worship,” in *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century*, 152.

While there was much agreement as to the problems postmodernism raises with the church today, and in particular with preaching, there was very little agreement as to how preaching could become more effective in reaching postmodern people. It became clear that the variety of approaches to preaching presented in the literature was so dramatically diverse that they were bewildering to most pastors. The result being that most pastors had done very little reading on the subject of preaching since seminary and they relied on the tried and true, i.e. “what works,” for their own preaching practices. Based on the interviews conducted, I have come up with six conclusions concerning the findings articulated in chapter four.

My first conclusion is that preaching is the primary reason, but not the sole reason, churches sustain growth over time. Very few, if any, churches are able to sustain growth without a strong preaching ministry.

I identified thirty churches planted in Loudoun County, Virginia, within the last twelve years. Of those thirty, four (including my own) maintained sustained growth for over two years, sustained growth being defined as a growth rate equal to or greater than the growth rate of the county for a period of time covering at least the last two years. All four of these growing churches have very strong preaching ministries, and in each case, preaching is one of the defining characteristics of the church.

My second conclusion is that pastors in growing churches, with a few notable exceptions, practice expository preaching from the Bible. Three of the four growing churches had pastors who regularly preached expository sermons through books of the Bible. While not always the initial reason people visited each of these churches, all three pastors specifically

mentioned expository preaching as the primary reason people stayed in the church. Therefore, I have concluded that expository preaching does not necessarily attract large numbers of people initially, but tends to keep the people it does attract and lends itself to sustained numerical growth.

...

Furthermore, of the ... pastors who preached topically, all had seen initial growth that was very strong, and early on had attracted quite a number of new people to the church. However, over time, these numbers seemed to dwindle, with four of these five churches sustaining numerical losses of 30% to 56% of the congregation. The remaining ... church, which had lost 23% of the congregation, had regained significant numbers of people after the pastor switched to a mix of topical and expository preaching. Therefore, I have concluded that topical preaching is able to attract people in the short-term, but not keep them for the long-term. Topical preaching, with a few notable exceptions, does not lend itself to sustained numerical growth.

Ironically, this was predicted by Os Guinness in his insightful little book, *Dining with the Devil*, when he wrote, “Modernity simultaneously makes evangelism infinitely easier but discipleship infinitely harder. The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that Christian faith has become so deformed. Under the influence of modernity, we modern Christians are literally capable of winning the world while losing our own souls.”²

Michael Horton decries what topical, felt-needs, moralistic preaching has done to the church at large:

So much of the moralistic preaching we get these days presupposes the error that somehow principles, steps for victory, rules, guidelines that the preacher has cleverly devised (i.e., the traditions of men?) promise spiritual success to those who will simply put them into

² Guinness, *Dining with the Devil*, 43.

daily practice. Those who are new to the faith regard this kind of preaching as useful and practical; those who have been around it for awhile eventually burn out and grow cynical about the Christian life because they cannot “gain victory” even though they have tried everything in the book.³

My third conclusion is that pastors who are passionate about preaching and have a positive expectation for preaching, regardless of style, have a great impact on the growth of their congregations. All ... of the pastors who had growing churches communicated great excitement about preaching. Each of them had thought through their style of preaching in an in-depth manner and was able to clearly articulate it. When describing their preaching, each of them became quite animated, not about what they were doing, but about what they believed God was doing among the members of their congregation. They each felt genuinely blessed that God would use their preaching to affect change in the spiritual lives of others. This matches what R. Kent Hughes, Pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, has written, “Scriptural preaching demands a passion that flows from the conviction that what you are preaching is true.”⁴

...

Ravi Zacharias emphasizes this point when he says, “What our culture needs is an apologetic that is not merely argued, but also felt. There has to be a passion in the communication. There must be a felt reality beyond the cognitive, engaging the feeling of the listener.”⁵

However, expository preaching will not rescue the ministry of a pastor who lacks passion about preaching. There were ... pastors who preached expository sermons but still saw

³ Michael Horton, “Preaching Christ Alone,” 2.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, “Restoring Biblical Exposition to Its Rightful Place: Ministerial Ethos and Pathos,” *Preaching* 17:5 (March/April 2002): 13.

⁵ Ravi Zacharias, “The Touch of Truth,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 42.

significant decline in their churches. In each case, though, the pastor lacked excitement and even interest in his own preaching. . . . Neither was able to communicate to me that they felt their preaching was affecting change in the lives of the church members, or, in fact, accomplishing much at all. Style of preaching was clearly subservient to personality type. I was reminded of Phillips Brooks famous quote, “Preaching is the bringing of truth through personality. It must have both elements. . . . It is in the defect of one or the other element that every sermon and preacher falls short of the perfect standard. It is in the absence of one or the other element that a discourse ceases to be a sermon, and a man ceases to be a preacher altogether.”⁶

...

I was truly struck by how powerful a role the pastor’s personality played in preaching and in church growth. The pastor sets the tone for the church by being an example of the dynamic he is seeking to instill in his church members. I had not really anticipated this at the beginning of my project, but it became more and more obvious as I conducted the interviews that if the pastor is excited about the effect of preaching in the lives of his people, as well as his own, then it seems to follow that the people of the church will be more likely to take the message to heart and be more willing to share what is going on in their church, and in their own lives, with others.

My fourth conclusion was also unexpected, that pastors of growing churches place an extremely high value on preaching and commit significant time (twenty-plus hours per week) to both sermon preparation and sermon reflection. All . . . of the pastors who had growing churches spent the most time on their preaching. They undertook extensive study of the passage they were preaching on, incorporating use of the original languages, word studies, understanding the context and historical setting of the text, and made widespread use of the relevant commentaries.

⁶ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1989), 25-26.

...

All of this takes time. Nearly every pastor interviewed mentioned that they did not have as much time as they would like to devote to preaching, primarily due to other pastoral duties. But these pastors valued preaching highly enough to deliberately protect the time they devoted to it from all of those other pastoral duties. Richard Lucas, long-time Pastor of St. Helen's Bishopsgate in London, reminds us that "It is perfectly possible, however, to be both disciplined and industrious and *still fail to do that for which God gave you the time*. Parkinson's Law, that 'work expands to fill the time available for doing it,' applies to parish work as to any other. It requires a steady, almost ruthless, determination in order to maintain any semblance of the apostolic ideal of Acts 6:4."⁷

My fifth conclusion was most unexpected; I came to believe that the oft-repeated claim that postmodern people have an attention span problem is a myth which does not correlate with the high intellectual level they possess and exhibit. In three out of four of the growing churches, the pastors preach for forty-five minutes or longer and preach sequential expository sermon series lasting from four months to two years. None of them felt the people who attend their church had a problem with hearing a long sermon or following a long series. And yet, [some] ... pastors I interviewed ... used the "attention-span problem" as a rationale for refusing to preach longer sermon series through books of the Bible.

I had such difficulty understanding this rationale that I sought outside confirmation and took it to two youth pastors ... who were not a part of this research project. Independently of each other, both said that the issue of attention span was a created problem in the church by

⁷ Richard Lucas, "Who Else? An Appeal for True Preaching!," *Reformation and Revival* 1:4 (Fall 1992): 20.

sermons that were either boring or shallow or both. Neither felt that interesting sermons that engaged the mind with theological substance would have a problem with “attention span.” Both rejected outright the idea that people could not follow a series over a longer period of time.

Trevor Bron, Pastor of TNLC in Denver, makes no apologies that TNLC services last over ninety minutes or that his sermons are forty-five minutes long. He rejects the notion that GenXers have short attention spans. “Sporting events, movies, evenings out are all longer [than a TNLC service]. The key question is, Are they captivated? People will listen to a communicator if he is captivating.”⁸

...

Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Fellowship in Seattle, a leading pastor in the Emerging Church movement, says, “They tell you church is supposed to go an hour with only twenty minutes of preaching, but I preach for an hour, hour and a half.” Driscoll’s sermons are verse-by-verse exposition. ... “so much for the short attention span of Generation X.”⁹

I think the “attention-span problem” is more an issue of getting a hold of people’s attention quickly enough that they do not tune you out simply because they are not interested in what you have to say. In other words, they want to be told up front why they should pay attention to you and your preaching. Andy Stanley, Pastor of North Point Community Church and son of television preacher Charles Stanley, in a 2000 interview with *Leadership* journal, was specifically asked about this issue of attention spans.

Leadership: We hear about the shorter attention spans of contemporary audiences, that this A.D.D. generation can’t handle more than 15 or 20 minutes of preaching. Yet you typically preach for more than a half-hour.

⁸ James Wilson, *Future Church*, 89.

⁹ James Wilson, *Future Church*, 140.

Andy Stanley: My dad preaches an hour, and they can't get everybody in fast enough. The attention span thing is a myth. We've all listened to communicators, and number one, we couldn't believe the time went by that fast and, number two, we wish they wouldn't stop because they're great communicators. It has nothing to do with attention span. It has to do with the environment, the type of chair you're sitting on, what happened before, what your expectations are, the interest, the content, the visuals, the pace.¹⁰

Surprisingly enough, Lee Strobel, then of Willow Creek, says something very similar in a 1995 interview with *Leadership* journal. "We may have to connect with people more quickly these days – we need to establish credibility and relevance right away – but I think people will stay with you if you speak to issues that make a difference in their lives. I don't agree with the notion that people have short attention spans. People will sit in front of a TV for six hours at a time or attend a three-hour concert."¹¹

William Willimon, in an interview with *Cutting Edge*, the in-house journal of the Association of Vineyard Churches, commented that "Somebody asked [church growth consultant] Lyle Schaller about the length of sermons, and he said, "I think the length of the sermon will depend on the average age of the congregation. The younger your congregation, the longer the sermon tends to be." We said, "What? These are supposed to be the people who can't focus on anything longer than 9 minutes!" But he said, "No ... you have a generation that wants to be formed."¹²

¹⁰ Andy Stanley, "Invite Them into the Kitchen," interview by Marshall Shelley and Edward Gilbreath (Alpharetta, GA, Fall 1999), *Leadership* XXI:1 (Winter 2000): 27-28.

¹¹ Lee Strobel, "Timeless Tension," interview by *Leadership* (Carol Stream, IL, Fall 1995), *Leadership* XVI:4 (Fall 1995): 23.

¹² William Willimon, "Preaching: The Struggle to Rename the World," interview by Jeff Bailey (Durham, NC, Fall 1999), *Cutting Edge* 4:1 (Winter 2000): 6.

We have to remember that today we're preaching to congregations who have little difficulty following highly complex, multi-plot shows like *Alias* and *24*, where the plot extends not just from week to week but from season to season.

My sixth conclusion is that much of preaching today, which is supposedly designed for postmodern people, functions as if it was really designed, however inadvertently, for reaching moderns. ...

Jim Wilson, editor of FreshMinistry.org and Pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church in Seaside, California, writes about Pastor Erwin McManus recognizing this very phenomenon when he arrived as the new pastor at the Church on Brady [now Mosaic] in Los Angeles. "When McManus came to the Church on Brady, it was contemporary, following a 1980s model of ministry. In fact, it had been a leader in the contemporary church movement. But even though it was a contemporary church, it was time-locked in the 1980s. Los Angeles had moved into the future while Brady remained behind. Any church with fixed structures in a fluid environment will become outdated and irrelevant. What the church was calling 'contemporary' wasn't."¹³

Short topical sermons and short sermon series focused on dealing with "life-situation" issues and packed with visual techniques for getting and holding people's attention is not the most relevant means for engaging postmodern people. In fact, it is very much a model birthed in the church growth movement of Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner, and Win Arn, and the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth School. It has been more popularly advocated by Christian marketing research guru George Barna and his best-selling books, *The Frog in the Kettle* and *User-Friendly Churches*. It has certainly been most successfully modeled in megachurches like Willow Creek and Saddleback.

¹³ James Wilson, *Future Church*, 47.

My recommendations will further explain what it is that I believe postmoderns will respond to in preaching. As Ian Stackhouse explains, “This is a view of preaching that includes, but also transcends, the modern obsession with application and relevance.”¹⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PASTORAL PRACTICE

My first recommendation is that pastors who are ministering in a postmodern context should consider expository preaching blended with apologetics. Postmodern people respond positively to detailed explanation of not just what Scripture says, but why it says it. They want the “Why does it say this?” question answered before they will consider putting what it says into practice (the how-to or application). Author and apologist Os Guinness contends that there are at least four stages that we have to bear in mind for effective communication ... [in the last stage] there must be justification, answering the question of why the ideas presented are worthy of being accepted over against any variation or contradiction of them.”¹⁵

Postmodern people, even and especially believers, will not normally accept a passage at face value without fully understanding it. They will not automatically accept the intrinsic authority of God’s Word, apart from being convinced of its authority first, thus they will not routinely respond to the preaching of the Word with simple obedience, without being shown the benefits of that obedience, either in this life or the next.

...

¹⁴ Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 83.

¹⁵ Os Guinness quoted by Ravi Zacharias, “The Touch of Truth,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, 33.

Postmodern people need to have their worldview confronted by the biblical worldview, because they are looking for relevance to life as a whole, in terms of providing meaning to their lives, not just for relevance in terms of specific life situations or issues or felt needs. Tim Keller makes the case that this desire for “whole life relevance” actually works in our favor, making it easier to connect with postmoderns:

Abraham Kuyper’s understanding of Reformed theology enables us to say to post-everythings, “Christianity is not just a way for you as an individual to get peace, love and groovy vibes in Heaven. Christianity is a comprehensive worldview. You can be a Christian artist, dancer, manager, or minister and these are all ways of living out the gospel.” When post-everythings hear that, they get extremely excited. They have never considered that Christianity embraces the whole of life.¹⁶

Keller says the use of “offensive apologetics” helps us to make this case because it “... reveals the arbitrary and (usually) unconscious nature of their own faith assumption and the inadequacies of their own world views.”¹⁷ Craig Loscalzo agrees, “Apologetic preaching clarifies the misunderstandings postmodern people have about Christianity. Perhaps most importantly, apologetic preaching will make clear where the gospel and politically correct religious forms — the non-threatening, unobtrusive religious expressions that postmodernism accepts — part ways.”¹⁸ Likewise, “Apologetic preaching unashamedly takes on rival meaning systems and helps address obstacles to faith.”¹⁹

Keller says we do this by dealing with the implausibility structure that postmoderns have accepted which keeps them from accepting Christianity.

¹⁶ Timothy Keller, “Ministering to Post-Everythings.”

¹⁷ Keller, “Preaching to the Secular Mind,” 60.

¹⁸ Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

There have been many times in New York City that I have seen people make professions of faith that seemed quite heart-felt, but when faced with serious consequences if they maintained their identification with Christ (e.g. missing the opportunity for a new sexual partner or some major professional setback) they bailed on their Christian commitment. The probable reason was that they had not undergone deeper ‘world-view change’. They had fitted Christ to their individualistic world-view rather than fitting their world-view to Christ. They professed faith simply because Christianity *worked* for them, and not because they grasped it as true whether it is ‘working’ for them this year or not! They had not experienced a ‘power-encounter’ between the gospel and their individualistic world-view. I think apologetics *does* need to be ‘post-modern.’ It does need to adapt to post-modern sensibilities. But it must challenge those sensibilities too. There do need to be ‘arguments.’ Christianity must be perceived to be true, even though less rationalistic cultures will not demand watertight proofs like the older high-modern western society did.

What this means now is that there are two parts to sharing the gospel in a particular culture – a more ‘negative’ and a more ‘positive’ aspect.

a) The more negative aspect has to do with ‘apologetics’ – it consists in ***deconstructing the culture’s implausibility structure***. In short, this means you have to show on the culture’s own terms (that is, by its own definitions of justice, rationality, meaning) that its objections to Christianity don’t hold up.

b) The more positive aspect of sharing the gospel is to ***connect the story of Jesus to the base-line cultural narratives***. In short, you have to show in line with the culture’s own (best) aspirations, hopes, and convictions that its own cultural story won’t be resolved or have ‘a happy ending’ outside of Christ.²⁰ [Emphasis his]

...

Most people have not thought about their own faith assumptions or the inadequacies of their own world views, and so it becomes necessary for us, before we explain our view, to show them why they adopted the prevailing secular view and how that view fails to be either workable or truthful.

²⁰ Timothy Keller, “Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ,” *The Movement - Redeemer Urban Church Planting Center e-Newsletter* (October 2004), <http://www.redeemer2.com/themovement/issues/2004/oct/deconstructing.html>. (8 September 2005).

David Mills, director of publishing for Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry and senior editor for *Touchstone* magazine, argues that we must make the case for opposing the prevailing secular view when that view is neither workable nor truthful:

Without doctrine the church cannot challenge secular moralities, even when it is unified in condemning them. The world has its own doctrines, which only other doctrines, true doctrines, can challenge. And the world is usually very clear about what it believes, and what it believes is usually attractive enough to capture the unsuspecting, the naive and the gullible if the church is not equally clear. . . . Instinct and prejudice are not adequate responses to evil, especially when evil presents itself so winsomely. It is not enough to say that such things are bad. You must be able to show why they are bad, and why they must be opposed.²¹

Chris Altmann, pastor and author of *Preaching to Pluralists*, reminds us that “Even though ways may be found to proclaim the gospel relevantly in every culture, inevitably that gospel will be at odds with certain things within that culture.”²² He explains that once we figure out where the gospel clashes with the culture, it shows us where we have to challenge that culture with apologetic preaching.

...

Postmoderns are interested in “big question” relevance, not just in terms of improving various aspects of their lives (use of time and money, improving my parenting and marriage), but in terms of making life-changing decisions like leaving the corporate world for the mission field and whether or not one should be married at all. However, they are distrustful of the church supplying answers to these questions since they view the modern generation (i.e. their parents) as having received poor direction from the church in all of those areas, thus leaving them a legacy

²¹ David Mills, “Necessary Doctrines: Why Dogma is Needed & Why Substitutes Fail,” in *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century*, ed. Kenneth Tanner and Christopher Hall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 117.

²² Chris Altmann, *Preaching to Pluralists* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 45.

of bad choices. This is one reason why topical preaching starts out with a major authority problem – before the preacher even gets started! While postmoderns may appear to be listening to yet another topical sermon on how to “fix” some aspect of their lives, they are easily able to dismiss it as simply more pious advice that doesn’t work in the real world.

...

Apologetic expository preaching not only defends the main point of the biblical text, but demonstrates the problems generated by unbelief in that same text. Preaching then has to critique the unbelief, showing that the problems of the unbelieving or non-Christian position are far greater than any weakness in the believing or Christian view of the text.²³ Therefore, apologetic preaching must challenge the prevailing worldview in order to reveal its weaknesses and contrast them with the corresponding strengths of a Christian worldview centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

...

It is in obeying the Apostle Paul’s commend to “preach Christ and him crucified” that we are forced to face not only our own sermonic failures where Christ isn’t made the focus, but we’re also forced to face any other method, philosophy, religion, or worldview that doesn’t want Christ at the center of life.

...

Preaching with Christ at the center, which argues for the Christian worldview in contrast with the prevailing secular worldview, makes it that much more important for preachers to answer the “Why?” question when expounding a passage of Scripture.

²³ John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), 201-202.

...

Mark Driscoll is another example of a preacher who uses “offensive” apologetics in his preaching. “His sermons are straight to the point. They aren’t cute, clever, or gentle. And they certainly don’t try to appease popular culture. They are ‘in your face’ biblical – not street preacher rude but direct, nonetheless. “The gospel demands that I be countercultural,” Driscoll says. “Not culturally relevant but culturally offensive, not in a way that repels people but one that actually attracts people because it is so ‘other.’ We’ve lost a sense of holiness – that God is different and God’s people are to be different. People have plenty of psychologists and therapists; what they need are preachers who will preach the word.”²⁴

My second recommendation is that though they are skeptical of truth claims and “metanarratives,” postmodern people respond positively to learning the redemptive-historical setting of the text and want to know “the big story” of the Scriptures. Colin Smith writes about an insight he learned from a friend who was a missionary to a tribal group in northern Thailand.

The question is, Where do you begin in the task of communicating the gospel to a group of people who do not know who God is, what sin is, who Christ is, or what a Bible is? I will never forget my friend’s answer: ‘We tell them the big story.’ ... The great challenge before the preacher is to ... present the big story and to persuade postmodern people that it is true. In pursuing this, we have much to learn from our friends in northern Thailand. They know it is not enough to present disconnected truths about peace or fulfillment or family life. We will certainly speak about all of these things, but we must find ways of connecting them clearly to the person and work of Jesus Christ.²⁵

International apologist Ravi Zacharias writes that “In virtually every part of the world, students linger long after every session to talk with me and plead for answers to their barren

²⁴ James Wilson, *Future Church*, 142.

²⁵ Colin Smith, “Keeping Christ Central in Preaching,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, 111-112.

lives. All the education one gets does not diminish that search for inner coherence and a story line for one's own life."²⁶

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, professors at Redeemer University College in Ontario have written about, not just our need for a story line for our lives, but our need for the biblical story for our lives.

All human communities live out of some story that provides a context for understanding the meaning of history and gives shape and direction to their lives. ... If our lives are to be shaped by the story of Scripture, we need to understand two things well: the biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story. This book is the *telling* of that story. We invite readers to make it their story, to find their place in it, and to *indwell* it as the true story of our world. ... In its different versions, the modern Western story has been so dominant and has so strongly asserted its right to be *the* story that it is often assumed that we should use it for understanding the grand narrative of Scripture. But biblical Christianity claims that the Bible alone tells the true story of our world.²⁷ As N. T. Wright says, "The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. It is public truth."²⁸

Barbara Brown Taylor, author and professor at Piedmont College, writes movingly of the impact that stories have not just on her audience, but on herself as well. "As a preacher and teacher, I make my living telling stories. While I know people who say that they 'use' stories to make important points, I am one of those listeners who consistently remember the stories and forget the points. That is because the points tend to be perfectly clear and well behaved, as very little in my life ever is, while the stories (at least the good ones) star flawed characters with muddy motives whom I recognize at once."²⁹ William Willimon reminds us that connecting our

²⁶ Ravi Zacharias, "An Ancient Message, through Modern Means, to a Postmodern Mind," in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 26.

²⁷ Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 12, 20.

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 41-42, quoted in Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 20.

²⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Never-Ending Story," *The Christian Century*, March 8, 2003, 37.

story with the biblical story, as Barbara Brown Taylor illustrates above, isn't always a neat fit, "So while Christian preaching struggles for connections, associations between my life and the word of the gospel, it also expects disassociation, gaps, tension between my story and the gospel."³⁰

Sarah Hinlicky writes about how postmoderns are pleading to hear the biblical story of redemption as the only thing that will make sense in their world. Largely because they too, like Barbara Brown Taylor, want to be able to see themselves in the story, while recognizing the truth and authenticity the story brings to life.

Our stumbling block is Christianity presented as panacea. You're right that we are looking for healing, and usually in all the wrong places. When we're at our worst, we turn to drugs to numb the pain, cure the boredom, and escape the nothingness that haunts our lives. At our best we try alternative medicine, psychology, meditation, yoga, diets and exercise, successful careers, or falling in love. We invest ourselves in these things, and they inevitably fail. Which is what we expected anyway. We have learned that nothing can be trusted, so we've given up on trust altogether. Don't tell us that the Church can be trusted because, frankly, we doubt it. Don't tell us Christianity is the answer to our problems, because nothing but death will take them away. (Ever wonder why our suicide rate is so high?)

So you're in quite a pickle: you can't tell us that the Church has "the Truth," and we know that the Church won't miraculously cure us of our misery. What do you have left to persuade us? One thing: the story. We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas. Our surrogate parents were the TV and the VCR, and we can spew out entertainment trivia at the drop of a hat. We treat our ennui with stories, more and more stories, because they're the only things that make sense; when the external stories fail, we make a story of our own lives. You wonder why we're so self-destructive, but we're looking for the one story with staying power, the destruction and redemption of our own lives. That's to your advantage: you have the best redemption story on the market.

Perhaps the only thing you can do, then, is to point us towards Golgotha, a story that we can make sense of. Show us the women who wept and loved the Lord but couldn't change his fate. Remind us that Peter, the rock of the Church, denied the Messiah three times. Tell us that Pilate washed his hands of the truth, something we are often tempted to do. Mostly, though, turn us towards God hanging on the cross. That is what the world does to the holy.

³⁰ William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 17.

Where the cities of God and Man intersect, there is a crucifixion. The best-laid plans are swept aside; the blueprints for the perfect society are divided among the spoilers. We recognize this world: ripped from the start by our parents' divorces, spoiled by our own bad choices, threatened by war and poverty, pain and meaninglessness. Ours is a world where inconvenient lives are aborted and inconvenient loves are abandoned. We know all too well that we, too, would betray the only one who could save us.

One more thing. In our world where the stakes are high, remind us that all hope is not lost. As Christians you worship not at the time of the crucifixion, but Sunday morning at the resurrection. Tell us that the lives we lead now are redeemed, and that the Church, for all her flaws, is the bearer of this redemption. A story needs a storyteller, and it is the Church alone that tells the story of salvation.³¹

The use of the biblical "big story" fits in well with apologetic expository preaching as people need to realize that this isn't just another story, but that this is *the* story. Tim Bednar, web-pastor of e-Church.com, plainly states that "This means that the goal of the preacher is to show that the gospel is better than any other story in the culture."³²

...

Not only does the use of the biblical "big story" fit in well with apologetic expository preaching, it is necessary that they are aligned together and not seen as two antithetical types of preaching. Even expository preaching needs to be set in its context so that the hearers don't lose the narrative flow of the overarching biblical story.

D. A. Carson wisely points out that when we lose the flow of the biblical story, we have encountered the greatest danger of expository preaching:

The inverse danger in expository preaching is that Christians will pick up a great deal about various texts long and short, but somehow lose the coherence of the big picture. ... The solution is to learn the inner-canonical connections, the biblical-theological connections, so well that you can show how this passage rightly understood in its own setting, fits into the canonical setting, and is part of a massive mosaic that drives you to

³¹ Hinlicky, "Talking to Generation X," 11.

³² Timothy Bednar, "Confessions of a Young Preacher," *www.theooze.com*, July 26, 2002, <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=25&page=1/> (6 October 2005).

Jesus Christ. ... Otherwise biblical exposition will drift toward the atomistic, and lose sight of the Bible's story line, which drives us toward Jesus and the gospel. That is too high a price to pay.³³

However, topical preaching is in far greater danger of losing the narrative flow of the Bible as it picks and chooses various Bible verses to proof-text the chosen topic. "Preaching for seekers can unwittingly flatten the landscape of scripture, so that Old Testament texts are used alongside New Testament texts with no regard for the progress of revelation."³⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, lecturer at Moore Theological Seminary in Sydney, writes that "It is grossly irresponsible for a preacher to moralize on isolated texts and to convey the notion that the real issue is finding self-esteem, happiness, health, self-fulfillment, or any other desirable quality in life, as if these were valuable in themselves. All these good qualities need to be put in perspective through the gospel and its framework of salvation history."³⁵

The apologetic of answering the why questions helps us to deal with the problem that "there has to be some basis for choosing the Christian story over that of other stories if the impasse of cultural relativism is to be overcome. On the other hand, what the narratives offer is not so much a set of reasoned propositions as a means of integrating biblical 'wisdom' into human thought and experience."³⁶

Once again, Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church wisely advises us:

³³ D. A. Carson, "The SBJT Forum: Profiles of Expository Preaching," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3:2 (Summer 1999): 96.

³⁴ Dennis Cahill, "Can Expository Preaching Be Relevant for Both Believers and Seekers?" *Preaching* 17:6 (May/June 2002): 9.

³⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 79-80.

³⁶ John Sims, "Postmodernism: The Apologetic Imperative," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David Dockery (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 335.

First, remember that post-everything people like narrative and story. They tend not to like the older kind of preaching that simply enunciated doctrinal principles. Neither are they excited about the newer user-friendly sermons of seeker-churches on “How to Handle Fear,” “How to Balance Your Life,” etc. So, do we throw overboard everything we have done? Absolutely not. We turn to Geerhardus Vos who says that every single part of the Bible is really about Jesus. If you know how to do Christ-centered preaching, then you turn every single sermon into a kind of story. The plot of the human dilemma thickens, and the hero that comes to the rescue is Jesus. Christ-centered preaching converts doctrinal lectures or little how-to talks into true sermons. Post-everythings who are interested in narrative are reached by such preaching that is deeply Reformed.³⁷

...

Marva Dawn, author and theologian, comments on this lack of biblical stories in preaching as having been derived from the loss of God as the center of our preaching. She says, “Keeping God as the center of preaching involves telling the stories of faith so well that God’s invisible presence becomes visible, so that we can catch sight of God’s intervention in the past and in the present.”³⁸

...

Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, writes, “The Gospel that the early church proclaimed was a story, and its appeal lay in its claim that it was the one true story that revealed the truth about our world, ourselves, and the character of God.”³⁹ Paul David Tripp, writing about preaching in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, tells us:

I will only understand my identity as a believer when I daily see my story embedded in His Story. ... This is what we all need every Sunday—the helicopter view of life that only the grand story of redemption can give. Preaching must pull us out of our confusing little corners and enable us to see the grand vista of life. Only this kind of “whole story”

³⁷ Timothy Keller, “Ministering to Post-Everythings.”

³⁸ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, 206-207.

³⁹ Michael Williams, “Presbyterians Speaking the Gospel into Postmodern Ears,” *Concordia Journal* 27:2 (April 2001): 111-112.

preaching can enable us to orient ourselves in every new situation. Only God's Story can confront the blindness and claustrophobia that continually weaken our functional spirituality.⁴⁰

My third recommendation is that postmodern people respond positively to biblical preaching when it evokes the imagination. After all, "The invitation of preaching is to abandon the script in which one has had confidence and to enter a different script that imaginatively tells one's life differently."⁴¹ William Ward Ayer, writing in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, highly commends that preaching appeal to the imagination:

Imagination is one of man's God-given characteristics, and the effective preacher must cultivate it. Imagination manifests godlike capacity. Imagination is what makes the poet different from the prosaic writer, the novelist from the recorder of history, the painter from the photographer. Broad and vivid imagination makes the great musician, and it often makes the interesting preacher, when it is kept under control of the Spirit. . . . Imagination is a requisite for greatness in almost any field. The actor who has no imagination gives a sordid performance. It is so with the preacher. . . . Maclaren, Moody, Sunday, Parker, Spurgeon avoided fancy, but made interesting word pictures of Christ's experiences. The characters walked, lived, and breathed. . . . The mind then becomes a receptive blackboard for imagery.⁴²

Richard Eslinger, having taught preaching at Duke, Loyola, and United Theological Seminary, reminds us that the use of imagery and imagination are ongoing works in the lives of our listeners. "Preachers stand in the midst of congregations already formed and informed by the images of the culture. . . ."⁴³ What he is saying is that our words evoke the use of the imagination

⁴⁰ Paul David Tripp, "A Community of Counselors: The Fruit of Good Preaching," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21:2 (Winter 2003): 49-50.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching as Reimagination," *Theology Today* 52:3 (October 1995): 327.

⁴² William Ward Ayer, "The Art of Effective Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:493 (January 1967): 38-39.

⁴³ Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletical Method* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 256.

whether we intend them to or not, so we would be wise to give thought to how we employ mental imagery.

Word pictures are more effective in facilitating understanding than visual pictures. “The truth is, the Bible may communicate better with the television generation than with any other. Certainly this is true of the teachings and parables of Jesus. The reason is to be found in the picture language and the stories the Scripture uses.”⁴⁴ For example, the postmodern age is an image-rich age; therefore, postmodern preachers should draw on image-rich narratives and stories to present the gospel and make it clear. Not merely stories for stories’ sake, but the imagery and symbolism part and parcel to narrative will capture postmodern imaginations and penetrate postmodern hearts.⁴⁵

... our listeners want to be able to imagine themselves participating in the story, making the story personal, which is very difficult to do when using video or PowerPoint. Wayne McDill cautions us about the use of visuals, “Twenty-first century preachers would do well, however, to consider the power of simple oral communication before forsaking it for audio visual aids. ... Unfortunately, much of the impact of effective [sermon] delivery is lost with the use of some visual aids. Using an overhead projector or a PowerPoint presentation is no longer basic oral communication, with its power to engage the audience.”⁴⁶

Quentin Schultze of Calvin College, a leading writer on the use of technology in the church, says, “We do not live in an *image-savvy* culture. We must contend with an *image-saturated* yet largely *image-ignorant* society. Our lives are *image-intense*, and undoubtedly

⁴⁴ Peter Flammig, “Preaching To The “Image” Generation,” *Faith and Mission* 3:1 (Fall 1985): 59.

⁴⁵ Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World*, 22.

⁴⁶ Wayne McDill, “Low-Tech Preaching in a High-Tech Age” (Evangelical Homiletics Society), *www.ehomiletics.com*, Paper. <http://www.ehomiletics.com/members/papers/01/mcdill01pf.php/> (7 October 2005).

movies and commercials have an enormous impact on young and old alike. But at the same time we are not very astute about how images communicate.”⁴⁷

...

Thomas Long writes about how preachers should react to this encouraged use of the imagination on the part of the people in our congregations.

If we recognize that the hearers are engaged in an imaginative act of listening, taking our sermons and refiguring them in their minds, ... If two hundred people hear the sermon, then we can be assured, and reassured, that two hundred at least slightly different versions of the sermon will be heard.⁴⁸

...

This fits hand in glove with placing our story within the context of the biblical story (recommendation two) because we have to use our imagination to do that.

It [the Bible] functions as the authoritative Word of God for us when it becomes the one *basic* story through which we understand our own experience and thought, and the foundation upon which we base our decisions and our actions. In other words, the Bible provides us with the basic story that we need in order to understand our world and to live in it as God’s people. We know that it is one thing to confess the Bible to be the Word of God, but often quite another thing to know how to read the Bible in a way that lets it influence the whole of our lives.⁴⁹

Eugene Peterson – author, pastor, and professor – has written about using the need to use our imagination to find our place in God’s story:

The Bible’s honest stories ... show us a spacious world in which God creates and saves and blesses. First through our imaginations and then through our faith – imagination and faith are close kin here – they offer us a place in the story. ... They invite us in as participants in something larger than our sin-defined needs, in something truer than our

⁴⁷ Quentin Schultze, *High Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 20-21.

⁴⁸ Thomas Long, “The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Preaching,” *Interpretation* 44:4 (October 1990): 348.

⁴⁹ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 21.

culture-stunted ambitions. We enter these stories and recognize ourselves as participants, whether willing or unwilling, in the life of God.⁵⁰

The other aspect of this recommendation that needs attention is for us to be careful that our use of visuals doesn't detract from the imagination, which is easy to do when using video or PowerPoint. They show you exactly what's happening on the screen and one neither has to use his or her imagination nor can easily place themselves in the story. "In a practical sense, the thinking involved in watching television (or video or a PowerPoint slideshow) is radically different from that which is necessary in verbal communication (reading, speaking, listening). That gap between that which is visual and that which is verbal is profound, differing not only in degree but in kind.⁵¹ As Gavriel Salomon explains, "Pictures need to be recognized, words need to be understood."⁵²

...

As the well-known Christian author and philosopher Jacques Ellul reminds us, whatever the culture dictates to us regarding modes of communication has to be tempered by the overwhelming case that Christianity is essentially audio and not visual.⁵³ Ravi Zacharias wisely informs us:

Finally, we need an apologetic that will rescue not only the ends but also the means. I bemoan the loss of linguistic strength in our time. Jacques Ellul rightly describes this

⁵⁰ Eugene Peterson, "Living into God's Story," *www.theooze.com*, August 31, 2002, <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=1&page=1/> (30 December 2005).

⁵¹ William Brown, "Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 318.

⁵² Gavriel Salomon, *Interaction of Media, Cognition and Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 36; quoted in William Brown, "Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 318.

⁵³ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 48-111, quoted in Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 112.

culture as one that has humiliated the word; we have lost the beauty in language. Alexander Pope described the conversion of water into wine: ‘The conscious water saw its master and blushed.’ A thousand pictures could not do better than that word picture for us.⁵⁴

Again, Trevor Bron has cogently said, “I don’t feel the picture has to be ‘physical’ for the audience to ‘see’ it. That’s why people read fiction.”⁵⁵ In fact, Stackhouse considers the predominance of the visual to be an obstacle to the recovery of biblical preaching.⁵⁶

My fourth recommendation is that postmodern people respond well to the opportunity to interact with the sermon (Q & A, sharing opinions, etc) in smaller group settings like Sunday School and Bible Studies where they are known by the other participants. They are uneasy with these forums in the worship service because speaking in a large group setting makes many of them uncomfortable.

Neil Wiseman encourages this sort of interaction, ... “Good input for preaching comes from discussing a scripture passage with a select group of parishioners before one does the preaching. For example, he might discuss his plan to preach on [forgiveness] next Sunday. He can ask his group what the doctrine means to them, when they first heard this doctrine, and when they experienced the forgiveness of God.”⁵⁷

...

Thomas Long reminds us that we cannot get away from our constant interaction with our listeners, and our preaching is directly affected by that interaction. He says, “Regardless of how we navigate those last few steps into the sanctuary, we come fresh from engagements with the

⁵⁴ Zacharias, “The Touch of Truth,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, 43.

⁵⁵ James Wilson, *Future Church*, 89.

⁵⁶ Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church*, 117.

⁵⁷ Neil Wiseman, *Biblical Preaching for Contemporary Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 139.

community of faith. ... Whether we have been praying, talking, teaching, preparing, or listening, we have been immersed in the lives of the people to whom we will speak, which is another way of saying that, symbolically at least, we rise to the pulpit from the pew.”⁵⁸ The sermon is an act of Christian speaking that occurs in the center of a web of gospel speech.⁵⁹

Postmoderns especially appreciate being involved in the process of preaching, as much beforehand as afterward. But initially, I think it will be easier and more profitable for preachers to open up the sermon to the congregation for questions and comments after the sermon is preached. This is primarily because postmoderns are interested in pursuing the main idea of the sermon further. They are quick to question assumptions made by the preacher, want to clarify matters not fully understood, and are focused on finding out the answers to the questions, “What does this look like on Monday?” and “How does this work in my world?”

Again, Susan Hecht reminds us, “To engage in such an approach requires wisdom and humility on our part. It is an approach that invites us to be patient students of those we seek to reach, able to guide a conversation with gentleness and respect. ... A process of persuasion that involves asking questions, listening, and understanding before explanation of the gospel can be very effective in reaching [postmoderns].”⁶⁰

To be “able to guide a conversation with gentleness and respect” is biblical wisdom indeed. After all, it was the Apostle Peter who told us in 1 Peter 3:14b-16a, “*Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared*

⁵⁸ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 11-12.

⁵⁹ Thomas Long, “Preaching in the Middle of a Sainly Conversation,” *Journal for Preachers* 18:2 (Lent 1995): 20.

⁶⁰ Susan Hecht, “Faithfully Relating to Unbelievers in a Relational Age,” in *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, 253.

to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...”

When we involve others, particularly postmoderns, in the process of preaching, seeking out their thoughts and opinions on the passage in advance and offering the opportunity to clarify ideas and answer questions afterwards, then we are making the preached Word a central and greater part of “the web of gospel speech.”

Almost thirty years ago, Leander Keck of Yale University said, “Every renewal of Christianity has been accompanied by a renewal of preaching. Each renewal of preaching, in turn, has rediscovered biblical preaching.”⁶¹ Postmodernism has brought about a new opportunity for preaching. I pray that biblical preaching will once again bring about a renewal of Christianity in our day and time.

⁶¹ Leander Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1978), 11.