

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL TO A POSTMODERN GENERATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction: Postmodernity and a Post-Christian Society

There seems to be a general agreement that we are living in a time of transition between two competing worldviews: modernity and postmodernity. The exact nature of each of these worldviews and the extent/permanence of the ‘paradigm shift’ is much debated in current scholarship. It is not intended here to examine postmodernism as a philosophical framework or to enter into the debate as to the extent of its influence in academia. The concern in this article is to focus on its impact as a cultural phenomenon in the lives of ordinary Australians. In this context, the cultural shift is also aligned with the reality of a post-Christian society. There is no intention to investigate either phenomenon exhaustively but simply to make some general comments in order to provide a setting for discussion on communicating the Christian gospel to a postmodern congregation. The elements described below could be debated but, as the intention is only to paint with broad brushstrokes, the overall picture would be agreed by many.

Some of the key elements in postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon are: a thoroughgoing scepticism about objective truth; a rejection of rationalism; a hermeneutic of suspicion; the proliferation of choices and options in every realm of life as a positive state; a decline of rampant individualism and a resurgence of interest in community (both

physical and virtual).[1] ‘Truth’ is viewed as a construction of the individual mind and thus subjectivism is dominant, with its valuing of eclecticism and utilitarianism. The autonomous self (‘my experience’) has now become the determiner of truth and reality. Language is then used to construct that reality, and in the process all totalising narratives are rejected. In embracing such pluralism and relativism, language is viewed as a purely pragmatic instrument used to construct and manipulate a ‘reality’ in which the ‘image’ is everything. As a result, there cannot be any ultimate concerns, universal ethics or morality; life is then reduced to caring for our own well-being with the stress on managing our life and the environment for our benefit and pleasure. The answers to our problems are then found in therapy and in the process such Christian concepts as sin, forgiveness, guilt, grace, death and resurrection are either rejected or trivialised.[2] The real difficulty for any society holding such ideas is not so much that *all* truth is relativised, but the intimate juxtaposition of the many truth claims that then makes community identity and cohesion problematic.[3]

To see how these elements are demonstrated locally, we can turn to a recent book by Hugh Mackay in which he examines the rapid and pervasive nature of social, cultural, technological and economic change in Australian society. Diversity and pluralism are now accepted social and personal realities.[4] In his opinion,

Australia is becoming a truly postmodern society—a place where we are learning to incorporate uncertainty into our view of the world. The absolute is giving way to the relative; objectivity to subjectivity; function to form.[5]

This is a fundamental cultural shift that corresponds to a style shift that was already well-established in the worlds of art, design, cinema and literature. For most Australians,

choice has become a supreme value, with each person seeking to construct a worldview that coincides with their personal values, beliefs and aspirations. 'Postmodernism insists that there is an infinity of alternatives, and encourages us to explore them.' [6] There is a high degree of insecurity and uncertainty that accompanies these changes in every area of life—marriage, family, work, religion, leisure, media, and politics. 'The present culture shift is a shift towards uncertainty, a shift towards diversity, a shift towards complexity.' [7]

The danger in our acceptance of this diversity and our embrace of pluralism is the potential loss of a necessary sense of identity: where we have come from, where we are going, having a place to call our own. The gloomiest prospect is to see the future of our society in terms of ever-increasing fragmentation and alienation; that we become simply a collection of 'individuals' with the loss of any meaningful sense of community. Those who are more hopeful believe there will be an emerging sense of 'reconnection' with the recovery of genuine community. [8] In Mackay's opinion, those who advocate the promise of an emerging 'global village' through the information revolution and cyberspace as the answer to the loss of identity and community are guilty of the 'greatest of all modern hoaxes'. [9]

In the midst of all this change, Mackay sees no signs of a revival of Christian faith and practice. The growing interest in 'spirituality' is not reflected in the growth of the Christian church. He comments that Christianity has 'never been an integral, intrinsic force in Australian political, cultural or social life in the way it has been for instance, in America or Western Europe.' [10] It has always been essentially a private matter and for most Australians a relatively unimportant one. Nevertheless, most Australians are 'theists' and value religious belief, no matter how ill-defined it happens to be and they do

value religious input in any discussions about vision, purpose and the moral dimension of life.[11]

Preaching to a Postmodern Congregation: The Context

The combination of a postmodern culture and a post-Christian society needs to be taken seriously in any attempts to communicate the Christian gospel. While this obviously poses significant challenges, it is by no means all 'doom and gloom'. Stephen Toulmin has identified four areas of epistemology that have significance for Christian ministry in the change from modernism to postmodernism: the move from written communication to oral communication, from universal truth to particular truth, from the general context to the local context, and from the timeless to the timely.[12] This means that 'knowing' is inherently contextual and pluralistic, with the context being quite local. Walter Brueggemann argues that preaching and liturgy must, therefore, be contextual, local and pluralistic. As a Christian, he is not advocating an end to objectivity, only that we cannot do more than 'describe' how we perceive it. He believes that unbridled relativism is not really much of a threat, for in practice only a few competing truth claims are seriously debated. He urges the church to take seriously the matter of 'perspective', where the Christian claim to make sense out of the rawness of experienced life has validity, even though it cannot be proven or established absolutely.[13] Charles Bartow reminds us that the Bible is essentially a 'story' told through particularities, outlining God's relationship with specific individuals and peoples in concrete, historical settings. Moreover, it is a 'story' intended to be spoken aloud and heard in community, not one that was primarily intended to be written and read by individuals on their own.[14] This has profound implications for the ministry of preaching. It was popular for a while to speak of the approaching death of preaching because the current generation would only give attention

to visual images and electronic communication via video and computer-generated images. If scholars like Toulmin are correct, then the role 'oral' delivery is about to become more important rather than less.

This does not mean, however, that the 'forms' of preaching will simply be carried on as they have for many decades. According to Loscalzo, 'modern' preaching was essentially rational, focusing on factual knowledge to communicate religious truth. Faith often became a synonym for rationalism.[15] The sermon focused on one basic idea or proposition, which was then explained, illustrated and applied to the person's life.[16] The style was more in the mode of an academic discourse and the language was geared for a people who were familiar with the biblical story and theological language. The goal was often to impart universal truths and principles and it was often assumed that the correct 'information' would result in the desired transformation. Even 'revivalistic' style preaching was content driven, with the emotional focus intended to facilitate a 'reasonable' faith. In either case, the focus of the sermon was the individual who needed to make a (rational) decision about their faith commitment. This focus on the individual was exacerbated by the accompanying Protestant emphasis on the importance of personal access to God through reading and studying the Bible. Rodney Clapp reminds us that the rise of print technology moved the setting where attention is given to God's Word away from the context of corporate liturgy to the private space of the solitary reader.[17] Christian experience was removed from a community setting (liturgy, shared confession and living witnesses) to a privatised, interiorised, isolated personal experience. One of the gains of postmodernism is a new openness to the place of the community and the vital importance of interpersonal relationships.

Preaching to a Postmodern Congregation: The Use of Language

I design plain truth for plain people. Therefore of set purpose I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations, from all perplexed and intricate reasonings, and as far as possible from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scriptures. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and in particular those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in bodies of divinity, those modes of speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but which to common people are an unknown tongue.[18]

With these words John Wesley laid out his intention in preaching. As Outler reminds us, 'It was Wesley's way to speak as directly as he could to his actual audiences; this is plain...most of all in his sermons.' and '...it explains his choice of the sermon as the chief genre for his theological expositions.'[19] Wesley's sermons all had a very strong focus on 'application' and thus were very personal and practical, intended to enhance the spiritual well-being of his hearers.[20] In a real sense, Wesley's sermons were a 'dialogue', even if in practice one of the partners was 'silent' during the preaching event. However, part of the art of preaching is the ability to engage the momentarily silent partners in a genuine conversation, and for this to happen both the preacher and the community must share a 'common language'. If this was essential for Wesley in his day, how much more in a postmodern and post-Christian society.

Only a pulpit that identifies with the milieu of the time will be heard over the babble of other voices demanding people's attention... identifying with the postmodern world does not mean prima facie acceptance or rejection of its values or worldview. Creating identification means taking the postmodern world

seriously and addressing it from a collaborative rather than adversarial stance. A postmodern world demands a pulpit willing to be a viable conversation partner.[21]

To 'converse' effectively, we must speak the same 'language' and today there is an increasing sensitivity to the way that language is used not only to describe and interpret experiences, but also to 'create' the reality that is being described and interpreted. At this level we are thinking beyond such language descriptions as English, Chinese or Indonesian to the way that different cultures and sub-cultures speaking any one of these languages have their own particular 'language and grammar' that is often incomprehensible to a speaker from a different cultural or sub-cultural group. These 'languages' enable the individuals within the group to express their understanding of the world and to describe their experiences in a way that helps to bind the group together. The role of the 'community' in creating and communicating meaning for the members of that community is vital.

'for a characteristic of cohesive communities is that they have a terminology of their own...Communities define themselves and create corporate expectations by their own use of insider language. They tell stories that contribute to communal identity.'[22]

Thus to 'belong' requires the individual to consent to the authority of the group's interpretation. If the person challenges the prevailing interpretation and fails to convince them of the 'benefit' of the new interpretation, they will either have to conform to the prevailing viewpoint or be excluded from the group.

This community setting is essential for oral communication because, by its very nature, oral communication is inherently dynamic and living; unlike recorded words, spoken words cannot be ‘stopped’ like the freeze-frame function on a video for analysis and dissection. Living speech can only happen as an ‘event’ in a community setting where it is both said and heard. The words in a live speech to a community cannot be abstracted and decontextualised unlike words that are ‘captured’ by being recorded, enabling us to separate the knower from the known, and turn a dialogue into a monologue. Effective oral communication has the potential to bring us into a genuine community, but recorded words tend to individualise and privatise.[23]

The church’s oral center and basis draws it back to the communal, the present (both in time and space), the local and the concrete. And all this bespeaks the character of our God, who chose to communicate with and relate to us through the communal, the present, the local and the concrete.[24]

The Christian faith confesses that the Triune God is a ‘speaking’ God who has called us into, and especially meets with us in, a defined community—the Church of Jesus Christ. The clear implication is that the Christian community is a definite ‘culture’, with its own language and grammar. There is a ‘Christian language’ that enables us to describe and interpret the world as we experience it in relationship with the Triune God.[25] Loscalzo reminds us that

...everyday language and speech often fail when we try to make deeper, ultimate sense of our world. Giving congregations a theological vocabulary does not mean preaching sermons saturated with technical terms... We should offer people ways of experiencing their world theologically by reclaiming the meaning of words like

hope, faith, redemption and reconciliation. Even the word sin can be affirmed to help people describe the ever-real presence of evil—individual, corporate, institutional—in the world.[26]

However, even if we totally agree with this viewpoint, there is no escaping the fact that the Christian ‘language’ is no longer the language of our society as a whole or even of a major portion of it. The ‘languages’ of secular, post-Christian Australia do not connect meaningfully with the Christian language, and our language has become increasingly marginalised and limited to an ever-smaller sector of the nation. Some churches respond to this reality by abandoning the Christian language for the language of a more dominant or attractive group (for example, the language of therapy, politics, sociology, environment, economics) in order to try and win acceptance. Other churches maintain zealously the Christian language of their forebears (including the English of the King James Version), which they then require the ‘pagans’ to learn. As preachers, we too often fail to take seriously that we are no longer ministering in the world of the mid-20th century in which most of us grew up, were trained and entered the ministry. Many of the theological terms that we learned and of which we have grown so fond, no longer clarify the Christian belief for the average listener. Instead, they confuse them because the language, though biblical, is no longer meaningful in common speech. The continued use of terms from earlier archaic versions of the Bible or an earlier generation of preachers, even when they accurately reflect biblical concepts, evoke mental pictures that frequently distort the truth we are trying to proclaim. For example, even the English words in the Bible like holy, holiness, saint, sanctify, sanctification, sin, carnal, flesh, and commonly used theological terms of a generation ago, such as original sin and moral depravity, are either meaningless or they create the wrong image in the mind of the listener.

Alister McGrath calls to our attention the fact that God communicates with us through ordinary human language.[27] All words are inadequate to do justice to spiritual realities yet they point to them; let us also remember that inadequacy does not mean unreliability. Words have the capacity to function as the medium through which God can disclose himself and bring about a transforming encounter with Christ. He asks us to take seriously the fact that Christianity is Christ-centred and not book-centred, making Scripture and language a means but not an end, a channel rather than what is channelled. In presenting our message we must use language that is understood by the people.[28] Both Jesus himself and the writers of the Bible took seriously the common language of the people and presented truth to them in ways that were intelligible in their contemporary situation, drawing illustrations and models from that with which they were intimately familiar. For example, in talking about the spiritual reality that Christ provided for us by his death on the cross, Scripture works with a wide variety of images:

- from the battlefield - victory over sin, ransom
- from the law court - forgiveness, pardon, justified, acquitted
- from personal relationships - reconciliation, alienation, redemption
- from the prison - liberation, freedom from bondage
- from medicine - healing, wholeness, restoration to health[29]

None of these is adequate on its own and the truth is greater than the sum of the parts, nevertheless, all illustrate aspects of the atonement.

The original languages of the Bible were the common languages of the day: Hebrew, Aramaic, Koiné Greek. God's redeeming word is not arcane religious vocabulary, a mystic set of symbols or an ecstatic language whose meaning is revealed to the chosen

few. It was ordinary language—and so must ours be.[30] To demand that people learn a specifically religious vocabulary before they can develop a relationship with Christ is to go against the whole tenor of God’s revelation. We need to be reminded that none of the English words we treasure to describe spiritual experience are the direct words of Scripture, for all are translations of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The task for the faithful preacher is to accurately determine the meaning of the words of the original language for that day and then translate them into the language of our day. We must not be unalterably wedded to the language we learned in theological college or from a text book (even from our favourite translation of the Bible). English is a living language and it is undergoing constant change; furthermore, the same word means different things to different groups of people, according to their particular culture or sub-culture. Dictionaries give only accepted usage, but do not define actual usage. Our task is to articulate the unchanging gospel in relevant forms—the language of the people we are addressing. If we use terms that have no meaning for them, or perhaps even worse, the wrong meaning, no matter how hallowed they are in our version of the Bible or theological tome, then we are not being faithful to the task for which God has called us. We then reduce the powerful word of God to a theological irrelevancy or an anachronism. Alden Aikens calls us to use words that have an empirical base and are clearly associated with the life of our audience. To accurately portray spiritual truth we must always use metaphors and models in description that are familiar to those we address.[31]

We need to take seriously the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to ‘go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.’ (Matt. 28:20. NIV). This command clearly has two components: the evangelistic component of sharing the gospel with a pagan community, and the pastoral component of nurturing believers in their faith and its implications. The ‘language’ needed to

effectively minister in the first situation need not be the ‘language’ used in the second situation. The implication is that the Christian community (and especially those who preach) needs to become ‘bilingual’, able to speak with a pagan culture using its language and to speak with the Christian community using its language. In fact, evangelism cannot effectively occur without Christians being ‘bilingual’; we must be able to speak to the various cultures and sub-cultures in our society in their own language if we desire to gain a hearing for the gospel in understandable terms. However, effective discipleship will require the acquisition of the Christian language in order to access the spiritual wisdom of the Church and to be able to effectively participate in the life of the community. If the language of preaching is only that of the non-Christian cultures (for the sake of effective evangelism), or of the Christian culture (for the sake of effective discipleship) we fail to do justice to the clear command of Christ.

Therefore, the ‘language’ used in preaching must accommodate itself to the language of the cultural group being addressed at the time, using words and images that would be familiar to the people in their everyday life. This requires real skill in order to really ‘speak’ to the actual situation of the people by faithfully contextualising the gospel message, while avoiding the subtle dangers of syncretism. The task of Christian community formation requires that we establish a corporate consciousness and identity, while at the same time clearly establishing those elements that demarcate the Christian community from its surrounding pagan culture. A community ethos is based on the identity of the people of God—because of who we are, this is how we live. It is by using corporate language that we seek to facilitate social construction—drawing individuals and groups into a corporate identity in Christ. We must also realise that the churches need to be supported in their identity and vocation because the voices of the surrounding cultures ever bombard them with their ‘answers’.[32] Thompson reminds us that this

work of spiritual formation is unlikely to be successful without the use of distinctively Christian language: ‘One is unlikely to establish corporate listening without establishing the community’s own distinctive vocabulary.’[33] For example, while Paul clearly used ‘pagan’ language in order to win a hearing for the gospel, he also initiated them into ‘Christian language’ (for example, such terms as election, wrath, coming, and sanctification in I Thessalonians).[34] It is only in this way that we can express our thoughts, sentiments and experiences to one another within the community of faith, and this enables us to use certain words to evoke the larger story.

Not all Christian experience can be easily translated from the languages of our surrounding cultures and so the preacher must guide the community in this Christian language formation. This highlights the need of profound theological reflection on all aspects of pastoral communication. In the midst of the many expectations placed on the preacher, we dare not lose sight of the fact that preaching is a theological enterprise at heart.

The preacher’s ideal role resides in meaning giving...preaching helps people to grasp the world theologically, to bring theological meaning and understanding to their lives... it offers theological meaning to a culture that desperately seeks significance but does not know where to turn to find it.[35]

The preacher must not only be able to address the issues of life theologically himself or herself, but they must also be enablers of theological reflection by the individual members of the community because there is an irreducible cognitive content to the Christian faith.[36]

Preaching to a Postmodern Congregation: The Contexts for Preaching

The reality of postmodern culture is that a variety of social worlds do exist and, as Loscalzo reminds us, 'Postmodern people have not grown up in a culture permeated by Judeo-Christian values.' [37] The Christian task is to minister to people where they actually are, with their presently held beliefs and concerns, while seeking to persuade them of the credibility of the Christian worldview. [38] The preacher must adopt a missiological approach in speaking to the angst, despair, meaninglessness and spiritual homelessness that is so common in Australia. There is a need to demonstrate that the gospel does provide coherent and credible answers to the ultimate questions being asked by postmoderns. In such a setting, the sermon cannot simply be a set of rational arguments for the 'universal truth' of the gospel, nor can it be considered as an isolated 'moment' in the liturgy where all the 'answers' are given to the questions being raised. It is the whole life of the Christian community that is critical to effective communication in the current Australian setting; it requires both the life and the 'speech' to be congruent before persuasive witness is possible. The individual church congregation then provides the 'local context' to manifest the biblical story (through story, reason, symbol, ritual, spiritual experience, moral behaviour), providing a coherent worldview that 'explains' life as we know and experience it. [39]

It is vital that we recognise the importance of the fact that the church as a community has a long tradition in which it has kept alive a powerful 'memory' that allows it to continue to confess the origins of the self, the world and the community as creations of God. It has also kept alive a powerful vision through its confession of hope in God and the future he has planned and purposed for the self, the world and the community. This means that the

church does not need to succumb to the despair and defeat of the surrounding society; it can proclaim a present filled with potential and genuine hope because we are not in ultimate control—God is.[40] Our society is, of course, highly sceptical about this confession and would debunk the church's confidence in its proclamation. We do need to acknowledge that doubt is valid, but that the current tendency to doubt for doubt's sake and to debunk everything is personally and socially destructive. This is where the role of personal and community witness to the person of Jesus Christ, the gospel and its transforming potential is so important.[41] Since a postmodern society rejects out of hand the premise of any argument based on universal truth, logic is not of much use. It is the Christian story, with its shared experiences and relationships, that is compelling; the Christian faith does not need so much to be argued as to be shared.[42] The church needs to establish plausibility before it can address issues of credibility. If we cannot persuade people that we have something important and relevant to share and that it is in their best interests to hear it, then we will never be in a position to deal with issues of objective truth and reality.[43]

Brueggemann reminds us that in postmodernism the role of speech is not merely to 'describe' reality, but to 'form' reality. This takes place through the function of the imagination, which is the 'capacity to picture, portray, receive, and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens.' [44] He argues that people change primarily because of the offer of new models, images and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together rather than as a result of rational, logical argumentation. These models are conveyed by the particularity of narrative and transformation results from responding positively to the invitation to enter into God's story about himself, the world, the neighbour and the self; in the process unlearning and disengaging from a model that is no longer credible or adequate.[45] In

his opinion, the task of preaching is to fund a postmodern imagination by providing the materials and resources out of which a 'new' (Christian) self, world and community can be imagined.[46] The preacher is then offering a proposed Christian world that runs against the presumed world of the listener. This proposal is conveyed by stories, symbols and rituals that are image-rich, offering a new 'model' for understanding the self, the world and the community. It is a move from the modern stress on certainty to the postmodern stress on probability, making 'mystery' and 'hope' once more defining elements in the Christian story. This requires the sermon to be faithful to the biblical 'text', through which the power of the Spirit is able to radically reconstrue and recontextualise reality. This can only be effective in what Brueggemann describes as an 'evangelical infrastructure': a system or network of signs, stories, and sacraments that give a certain nuance, shape and possibility to human interaction, within the context of a mode of life, faith and speech that deals with active rescue from our 'common deathliness'[47] The goal is to enable healing, redemption and transformation for the self, the world and the community.

Such a model cannot be realised through one sermon. The task can be likened to building a mosaic: on any given occasion one sermon provides one piece but the preacher has in his or her mind the whole picture they are seeking to construct, even though it may appear to the congregation to be a series of disconnected pieces. This seems very acceptable to the postmodern mind, but the preacher does need to put the pieces in place in such a manner that a coherent and credible 'picture' emerges at the end of the day. 'The preacher's chance (both task and opportunity) is to construct, with and for the congregation, an evangelical infrastructure that makes a different communal life possible.'[48] We need to help people see where and how God is at work in their life, the world, and their relationships.

According to Brueggemann, biblical faith affirms that life is both created by God and consummated by God. We need to take account of both the past and the future, while refusing to absolutise the present. In fact, the present needs to be understood in the light of the past and the future; both modernity and postmodernism deny the biblical accounts of creation and consummation in order to make the present absolute.[49] The preacher's task is to supplant amnesia with memory and despair with hope, while living in a covenantal present, which then gives us back our forfeited past and holds out a hopeful future. Preaching must then reshape the present in the light of the past and future, to 'imagine' a self, a world, and a community in which greed, acquisitiveness and idolatry no longer dominate our present, forming an evangelical grid of memory/covenant/hope.[50]

In the process, the particular preaching situation must dictate the particular homiletic form: deductive or inductive, narrative or propositional, *didache* or *kerygma*, according to whichever best addresses the rival meaning systems and the obstacles to faith. An earlier generation of preachers could state 'the Bible says' and win a hearing for his or her argument. Today, the argumentative approach is unlikely to be effective from the pulpit, even though it will have its place in interpersonal conversation. Deductive logic requires a predisposed commitment to a premise or proposition; for example, 'the Bible is the authoritative Word of God and is absolutely true in all it teaches', but a postmodern and post-Christian age have no prior commitment to such a belief. Many people today respond better to subjectivity than to objectivity, longing to 'participate' in each other's stories. The narrative model that begins with people's experience and then invites them to make an appropriate response (induction) would seem to offer more hope of 'connecting' with the current generation.[51]

James Thompson, however, raises a note of caution regarding the widespread assumption that narrative preaching is the only or even the best model for homiletics today. He believes that its strength is to be found in a community where they are already well-informed about the Christian heritage. He argues that narrative preaching may be adequate to ‘shape’ community identity but it is not suited to explicating the ‘interpretation’ that is needed to enable the community to be cohesive in a thoroughly Christian way—especially if they are to live faithfully in a non-Christian culture. If we focus on narrative to the exclusion of other biblical genres, he believes we may lose the reflective dimensions of our faith. He agrees that stories, symbols and metaphors are evocative, but they ultimately require reflection and interpretation in order to enable transformation in personal and community life. This can be illustrated by the vital relationship between the gospels (narrative) and the epistles (reflection, interpretation). This is why he urges us to incorporate other biblical genres as models for preaching in a postmodern and post-Christian environment.[52]

Thompson would also caution us against an over-reliance on inductive preaching, which tends to focus on the individual or local community and thus may fail to address the larger concerns of Christian faith and praxis that have been made evident over the history of the Church—and which may not yet be evident in the history of a particular local church. He gives us a needed reminder that rational persuasion is not alien to the biblical account, not is it merely the product of the Enlightenment.[53] This reminds us that one of the realities of the present nature of Australian society is that it has within it people who are premodern, modern and postmodern in their understanding; our preaching has to take account of that and it has to be capable of addressing people wherever they are on the spectrum. While a particular congregation may be predominantly one of these types,

in a larger multicultural congregation in any of our major cities all three forms are likely to be present.

Evangelistic Preaching

The gospel story at its heart is incarnational, where God deliberately accommodated his revelation in Jesus Christ to our everyday human experiential and reflective capacity. God genuinely entered into dialogue with the human race and in his grace began the ‘conversation’ where we are rather than demand we begin where he would like us to finally be. This underscores the fact that preaching which is faithful to the gospel must also be ‘accommodated’ to the reality of people where they actually are now (culture and language), not where we would like them to finally be. [54] For example, Thompson draws our attention to the key role of Paul’s epistles as the continuation of a conversation, where Paul’s own story, the story of his listeners and the gospel story all intersect. In his evangelistic preaching to Gentiles, Paul would begin with the story of God’s action in creation, then in the story of the nation of Israel and supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He would tell how ‘that’ story intersected with ‘his’ story, and how both of these have now intersected with ‘their’ story. The flow is from God as Creator, with his plans and purposes for creation, the fulfilment in Jesus Christ’s death/resurrection and victory, enabling an invitation to be extended to return to God and so participate in God’s purposes, which then gives human life meaning and hope. Sermons are not, therefore, to be determined by the needs identified by market analysis, for true preaching will always disturb the pluralism of our culture by making an exclusive claim on us; a claim to be accepted or rejected.[55]

Pastoral Preaching

Evangelistic preaching must then be followed by pastoral preaching, in which the call to holy living is made explicit and it is particularly here that the issue of a specific Christian vocabulary needs to be considered. Preaching cannot be separated from the pastoral task and this involves much more than identifying personal problems in the congregation and seeking to give therapeutic solutions—counselling on a group scale. The pastoral task does involve giving comfort and support, but it also requires giving guidance, protection and ensuring the well-being of the community by faithfully interpreting the gospel message and its implications for the church in that local context. The preacher is involved in being a catalyst for spiritual transformation that then impacts every area of personal and community life.

Paul's preaching is a reminder that pastoral preaching transcends the questions of the moment in order to ensure that the focus for preaching is directed towards the triumph of God. This ultimate horizon is a corporate perspective that initiates the church into a common vision of its journey together, its common purpose, and its shared renunciation of a narcissistic culture.[56]

Preaching is an event that is community focused, not individually-focused and the eventual goal is the eschatological vision revealed in Scripture. In this way it is the task of the preacher to be sure to address the ultimate needs of the people of God and not simply their present desires and wants.[57] To be effective here, 'Preachers themselves are listeners [to God] who speak to facilitate other people's listening.'[58] It is vital that the preacher remember that he or she is also a member of the community and so must speak in that context, not as one merely speaking 'to' others, but as one who speaks with and on behalf of others. In a pastoral setting, it is the quality of our relationship with the

community that is crucial to effective preaching and this cannot be faked by the use of 'code words' like 'dear friends' or 'sisters and brothers in Christ'. We must always be very careful not to use the language of manipulation and coercion, but the language of loving persuasion, direction and invitation. As we develop in our relationships within the community, so we are able to draw upon an ever-increasing 'fund' of shared memories, present experiences and shared hopes. Out of this we can sensitively open up to the church new possibilities based on the common 'story' that we share together.[59]

Conclusion

In this brief overview of the current setting for our preaching ministry it is apparent that we live in a time of rapid change and fluctuation. We minister to and with people whose experiences are radically different to those earlier generations whose world was far more stable and homogenous. There is an increasing questioning of every aspect of personal and community life, with very few certainties that would be universally held. Into such a ferment, that Church faces both increasing challenges and opportunities. As those charged with the particular responsibility to 'preach the Word', we too face many of these same challenges and opportunities. While in some senses it has never been harder to faithfully communicate the gospel, in other ways the doors of opportunity are wider now than they have been for a long time. To meet these challenges and maximise our opportunities, I believe we have to take seriously the need to:

- have a missiological focus for all aspects of our ministry to a post-Christian and postmodern nation like Australia
- become adept at identifying the specific local contexts in which we minister

- become skilled in cross-cultural communication; this requires knowing the local pagan context, the local Christian community context and being able to be a ‘bridge’ between them
- speak to the pagan context; this will require knowing its ‘language’ and being able to faithfully ‘translate’ the gospel into that language
- speak to the church; to enable Christian community formation will require the development of a Christian language that is faithful to the heritage of the church while speaking to the current context
- realise that the most persuasive preaching will do little if the life of the community does not faithfully reflect the life of Christ; our speech and our life must be congruent—the power of personal and community witness

To be effective in these areas requires the shared wisdom of the whole church community in Australia, as we prayerfully and reflectively engage in the challenge of faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Christ to the people of our day and age.

[1] Craig A. Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 13-20.

[2] Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (eds), *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 12-15. See also Loscalzo, 84-5.

[3] Loscalzo, 89-90.

[4] Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing Their Future* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1999), x- xviii.

[5] *ibid.*, xix-xx.

[6] *ibid.*, xx.

[7] *ibid.*, xxiv.

[8] *ibid.*, xxvii-xxxv.

[9] *ibid.*, xxxii.

[10] *ibid.*, 219-20.

[11] *ibid.*, 221-26.

[12] Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 186-92, in Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 6.

[13] Brueggemann, 8-10.

[14] Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 26-27.

[15] Loscalzo, 21.

[16] James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 2.

[17] Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 126-7.

[18] The Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, in Albert C. Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley*. Bicentennial ed. Vol 1: Sermons I, 1—33 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 104.

[19] *ibid.*, 55. From Outler's Introduction.

[20] *ibid.*, 97.

[21] Loscalzo, 20.

[22] Thompson, 99.

[23] Clapp, 132-4.

[24] *ibid.*, 136.

[25] This is surely the implication of such Scripture passages as Gal. 3:26-28 and Eph. 4:4-6. This is not to deny the painful reality of divisions within the Christian Church and the particular ‘languages’ of our denominational heritage. Nevertheless, I believe there is a common ‘language’ that belongs to all of us as ‘Christians’, even if there are ‘dialects’ peculiar to the Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, etc.

[26] Loscalzo, 26-27.

[27] Alister E. McGrath, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (England: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 26.

[28] *ibid.*, 26-29.

[29] *ibid.*, 44-45.

[30] *ibid.*, 49-50.

[31] Alden Aikens, ‘Wesleyan Theology and the Use of Models,’ *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 14:2 (Fall 1979), 64-65.

[32] Thompson, 94-6.

[33] *ibid.*, 98.

[34] *ibid.*, 99.

[35] Loscalzo, 26.

[36] Thompson, 121.

[37] Loscalzo, 32.

[38] Phillips and Okholm, 19.

[39] *ibid.*, 22.

[40] Brueggemann, 29-48.

[41] Loscalzo, 69-75.

[42] *ibid.*, 76-78.

[43] Phillips and Okholm, 16.

[44] Brueggemann, 13.

[45] *ibid.*, 24-25.

[46] *ibid.*, 19-20.

[47] *ibid.*, 26-27.

[48] *ibid.*, 26.

[49] *ibid.*, 28.

[50] *ibid.*, 49-57.

[51] Loscalzo, 39-40.

[52] Thompson, 9-13. See also Bartow, 103-4.

[53] Thompson, 14.

[54] Bartow, 116.

[55] Thompson, 40-49.

[56] *ibid.*, 93.

[57] *ibid.*, 85-92.

[58] *ibid.*, 112.

[59] *ibid.*, 114-19.