
Challenges for the Twenty-first-century Pulpit

D. A. Carson

The title of this essay (originally prepared as an address)¹ was suggested to me by David Cook, the visionary behind the founding of the new School of Preaching at Sydney Missionary and Bible College. Although I accepted with pleasure the invitation to speak, the more I thought about the invitation, the more I wondered if the title was a bit of a cheek. Indeed, I ruefully had to face my own hubris in accepting the assignment. In 2005, what could I possibly know about the challenges of the remaining ninety-five years of the century? If in 1905 I had been asked to address the challenges facing the twentieth-century pulpit, would I have managed to reflect on two world wars, the great depression, the end of the British Empire, the rise and fall of fascism and of (much of) communism, Vietnam, the deployment of nuclear weapons, men on the moon, the digital world, jet travel, global economics, the reshaping of communities by the impact of the automobile, the Holocaust and other instances of genocide (including that perpetrated by buffoons like Idi

1. This address was first prepared as the inaugural lecture, March 2005, of the School of Preaching founded by Sydney Missionary and Bible College. It is a pleasure and a privilege to present it in this slightly revised form in honor of my friend Kent Hughes, whose ministry has been remarkably dedicated to the strengthening of the pulpit. I have purposely not removed most of the evidence that this piece began its life as a lecture.

Amin and ideologues like Pol Pot), massive expansion of the church in Africa and China, horrendous accounts of martyrdom and unbelievably encouraging medical advances, the resurgence of militant Islam, the remarkable stiffening of the processes of secularization in much of the West, the unforeseen yet massive expansion of Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, and the dawning of that array of perspectives and epistemologies we label postmodernism?

And what should be said about the theological moves from widespread residual confessionalism through the classic liberal theology of the early decades of the twentieth century to Barthianism, ecumenism, and post-colonial theology, and the rise of major theological colleges and seminaries? The shift in Christian numbers from the North to the South and from the West to the East has still not been adequately explored. The transformation of social structures brought about by advances in contraception and by multiplying abortions have combined to give us throughout Europe, and now increasingly elsewhere (e.g., Japan), a birth rate below the 2.1 figure needed to sustain a stable population. We have traveled from the horse and buggy to supersonic speed, from telegraph and early telephones to instantaneous transmission of gigabytes of information, from rural life and pace to megalopolises, from realism to surrealism to virtual worlds.

All of these changes had at least *some* impact on the distinctive challenges of preaching in the twentieth century—yet which pundit living in 1905 would have predicted more than a tiny handful of them? So if the end is not yet, what changes are likely to occur by the year A.D. 2100? For someone who in 2005 is nearing the end of his sixth decade to pronounce on the challenges of the remaining ninety-five years of the twenty-first century is simultaneously an implicit claim to a prophetic gift and a charge to a lot of preachers to do what he is not going to live long enough to do himself.

For a start, then, I ought to restrict the immediate applicability of my remarks to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet I insist on a further limitation. It would be dangerous to focus on the challenges specific to the twenty-first century without recalling, however briefly, the challenges that confront the pulpit in *every* generation. That would be to ignore the perennially important for the sake of focusing on the temporarily important. The result would be a distorted view both of our challenges and of preaching itself.

So at the risk of stepping outside my mandate, I propose, first, to remind you of some of the perennial challenges in preaching, and only then to outline some of the peculiar challenges preaching faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Perennial Challenges

Some of the challenges facing preaching are timeless. In fact, we can see hints of them in the Bible. I will discuss four of the perennial challenges.

The Preparation and Qualification of the Preacher

In the nature of the case, the preacher will commonly, but not always, be an elder/pastor. That is why it is worth briefly reflecting on biblical passages that lay out his qualifications. We might begin with 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this list is how unremarkable it is. Everything that is required of the elder/pastor, with a couple of caveats, is elsewhere required of all believers. For example, if the overseer is not to be given to drunkenness, this certainly does not mean that all other Christians are permitted to get sloshed whenever they like. The demand that these pastors be hospitable is paralleled by the more general exhortation, “Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers” (Heb. 13:2 NLT). So it is with almost all the other entries. The thrust of all the entries in this list of qualifications, then, is transparent: Christian leaders are not necessarily qualitatively different from their brothers and sisters in Christ, but they *must* present in disciplined form the virtues that the Word of God requires of all believers.

One of the superficial exceptions is the insistence that an overseer/elder not be a novice, a recent convert (1 Tim. 3:6). Of course, that is a relative category. On the return swing of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in each church (Acts 14:23), yet this takes place only months after the conversion of the members of this church. In times of rapid expansion, someone who has been a believer for ten months is “not a recent convert” compared with all the rest who have been converted only during the preceding three or four months—though transparently, that same person would not be qualified to serve as pastor in a church where many people have been Christians for decades.

The other apparent exception is found in 3:2: the overseer/elder/pastor must be “able to teach.” That presupposes two things: the pastor must have reliable content (compare, for instance, 2 Tim. 4:1–5) and must be able to communicate it. Those who are mightily endowed with the gift of communication but who have little worth communicating are disqualified from pastoral ministry; those who know a great deal but who are utterly unable to communicate it, whether one-on-one or in larger company, are also disqualified. In one sense, of course, all

Christians should be teachers. If the Great Commission commands all of us to make disciples of all nations, *teaching* them to observe whatever Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:18–20), and if the readers of Hebrews can be rebuked because by the time of writing they ought to be teachers (Heb. 5:12), then there is some sense in which the responsibility to teach the Word of God is widely distributed throughout the church. Yet there is a narrower usage in the New Testament. James 3:1 reminds us that we are not to multiply teachers, knowing that they will be more severely judged. The church-recognized teaching authority is demonstrably vested in the pastor/overseer/elder; the corresponding lists of qualifications for, say, deacons, never mention this responsibility.

Another passage in the Pastoral Epistles sheds light on what has been said so far. In 1 Timothy 4:14–16, Paul links two other injunctions: “let all see your progress” and “watch your life and doctrine closely.” This suggests that both the pastor’s understanding of biblical truth and his own conformity to it should be progressing—indeed, progressing in such a way that other believers can *see* the progress. So here we have it again: exemplary living plus the responsibility to know and teach the Word of God—and, in this passage, growing on both fronts.

This suggests that we must work toward the abolition of a disjunction that is very common in the Western world, a disjunction that has no biblical warrant and that is potentially very dangerous. It is the disjunction between the pastor and the preacher. Some church leaders, we are told, are good pulpiteers, good proclaimers, good preachers, but really very poor at pastoral care. Others are wonderfully sensitive pastors but, rather sadly, cannot handle the Scriptures very well, and certainly cannot teach or preach. Yet Paul stipulates that *pastors/elders/overseers* must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9); theirs is the ministry of the Word and prayer. No matter how good they are at listening, hand-holding, and personal encouragement, if they cannot teach the Word of God they are disqualified from the office/role of pastor/elder/overseer. Of course, some pastors may exercise all or most of their teaching ministry one-on-one or in small groups; not all will be equally adept with the larger crowd. But Scripture leaves no place for the “pastor” who cannot teach. After all, a “pastor” is simply a “shepherd”—that is what the word means. And shepherds must feed the flock of God (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–4). Conversely, however, preachers who are nothing more than pulpiteers, who display few Christian graces that enable them to love people, work with people, listen humbly, exhort patiently, encourage graciously, and rebuke engagingly, are simply disqualified. They may be “able to teach” in some performance sense, but what is missing is the array of Christian graces that Christian pastors/elders/overseers must display. And

all of us engaged in this high calling should be *making progress* in both doctrine and life.

The first perennial challenge, then, is equipping preachers with gospel graces, gospel knowledge, and experience of communicating that gospel, so that they meet the minimal biblically stipulated qualifications for pastoral office.

An Adequate Grasp of What Preaching Is

Countless volumes have been written on this subject, of course. Here I shall restrict myself to five observations.

First, preaching is more than the oral communication of information, no matter how biblical and divine that information may be. Rather, we should think in terms of what might be called “re-revelation.” Across the centuries, God disclosed himself—he revealed himself—in great events (e.g., the burning bush, the exodus, the resurrection of Jesus); he disclosed himself supremely in the person of his Son. But very commonly he revealed himself by his words. Perennially we read, “The word of the Lord came to such-and-such a prophet.” So when that Word is re-announced, there is a sense in which God, who revealed himself by that Word in the past, is re-revealing himself by that same Word once again. Preachers must bear this in mind. Their aim is more than to explain the Bible, however important that aim is. They want the proclamation of God’s Word to be a revelatory event, a moment when God discloses himself afresh, a time when the people of God know that they have met with the living God. They know full well that for the Scriptures to have this revelatory impact the Spirit of God must apply that Word deeply to the human heart, so that preaching must never be seen as a mere subset of public oratory. Both the content (the Bible is God’s Word) and the transformative empowering (the Spirit himself) transcend any merely mechanical view of preaching.

Second, to remain true to this basic understanding of what preaching is, the preacher must be committed to the primacy of *expository* preaching. We must take pains to debunk what many people think “exposition” and “expository” mean. They associate exposition with a style that takes not more than half a verse per sermon and casts around widely for every conceivable association, biblical and pastoral. Certainly that is one form of exposition, but that form is not the essence of the matter. Exposition is simply the unpacking of what is there. In a narrative text (e.g., 2 Samuel) or major epic (e.g., Job), fine exposition may focus on several chapters at once. If a sermon takes two or three short passages from disparate parts of the Bible *and explains each of them carefully and*

faithfully within its own context, it remains an expository sermon, for it is unpacking what the biblical text or texts actually say. If we expect God to re-reveal himself by his own words, then our expositions must reflect as faithfully as possible what God actually said when the words were given to us in Scripture.

Third, there is an heraldic element in preaching. The Bible sometimes envisages other forms of oral communication, of course: we may be invited to reason together with the Lord (Isa. 1:18), for instance, or enter into a dialogical confrontation with him (e.g., Mal. 1:2–8; Rom. 6:1–2). Yet in the oft-repeated “Thus says the Lord” of the Old Testament, or in the proclamation so common to the New Testament, there is an unavoidable heraldic element—an announcement, a sovereign disclosure, a nonnegotiable declaration. As ambassadors, we are tasked with making known the stance and intentions of our Sovereign; we do not have the authority to tamper with his position.

Fourth, preaching is never an end in itself. It is not an art form to be admired, still less mere high-flown rhetoric that so captures the audience’s imagination that the content is of little importance. This is not to deny that artistry and rhetoric may be traced in sermons; rather, it is to keep ultimate ends in constant view. The faithful preacher will care little what folk think of his oratorical skills; he will care a great deal about whether he has faithfully represented the Master and his message. This includes a passionate commitment to make the Word wound and heal, sing and sting.

And that means, fifth, that we must study our own people, the culture of the people to whom we minister. Inevitably there are commonalities from culture to culture, but there are countless distinctives as well. To communicate effectively we must address the people of the time and place where God has placed us. This is a perennially urgent need in the thoughtful and faithful preacher, of course, but the peculiar shape this takes in the twenty-first century is part of what takes us into the second part of this essay.

A Firm and Growing Grasp of Scripture

This is implicit in Paul’s injunction so to advance in “life” and “doctrine” that others see our progress. Yet two further reflections may be of use:

First, what we mean by teaching “the whole will of God” needs some probing. When Paul attests that this is what he proclaimed to the believers in Ephesus, the Ephesian elders to whom he makes this bold asseveration know full well that he had managed this remarkable feat

in only two-and-a-half years. In other words, whatever else Paul did, he certainly did not manage to go through every verse of the Old Testament, line by line, with full-bore explanation. He simply did not have time. What he must mean is that he taught the burden of the whole of God's revelation, the balance of things, leaving nothing out that was of primary importance, never ducking the hard bits, helping believers so to grasp the whole counsel of God that they themselves would become better equipped to read their Bibles intelligently, comprehensively. This doubtless included not only what to believe but how to act. It embraced God's purposes in the history of redemption (truths to be believed and a God to be worshiped), an unpacking of human origin, fall, redemption, and destiny (a worldview that shapes all human understanding and a Savior without whom there is no hope), the conduct expected of God's people (commandments to be obeyed and wisdom to be pursued, both in our individual existence and in the community of the people of God), and the pledges of transforming power both in this life and in the life to come (promises to be trusted and hope to be anticipated).

Second, to pursue a firm and growing grasp of Scripture ideally demands an improving grasp of Scripture, of historical theology, of biblical theology, and of systematic theology. These disciplines may be distinctive, but they are certainly not mutually exclusive: growth in any one of them deepens growth in all of the others, and sustained ignorance of any one of them hampers growth in all the rest of them.

***A Deep Commitment to Making the Important Things
the Important Things, to Making the Central Things
the Central Things***

There is a kind of "biblical" preaching that is not so much unbiblical as trivial. Not long ago I heard a sermon on Luke 1:26–38, in which the angel Gabriel announces the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. The entire sermon focused on how God sometimes does unexpected things in our lives. After all, Mary didn't expect to become pregnant in this way. The rest of the "exposition" focused on Mary's psychological and spiritual profile in all of this. A fair bit of what was said had some sort of relation to the text; reasonable inferences were made. *But none of the "exposition," none of it at all, focused on Jesus!* Whatever interest Luke has in saying something about Mary is minor compared with his interest in telling us who Jesus is. Five minutes of the sermon reserved for some reflection on Mary's outlook might have been appropriate; the loss of Jesus was not.

Recently I skimmed a book that included a chapter on “Mrs. Noah.” Same problem: the author was so desperate to get the text to answer contemporary questions that virtually the entire account of the flood merely served to help us understand Mrs. Noah’s outlook. As it happens, this essay was more restrained than most popular writing of this sort. Even so, the author was terribly far removed from making the main thing the main thing.

Another sermon I recently heard, this one on John 2:1–11 (the changing of the water into wine, in Cana of Galilee), included some interesting comments on the social customs of Jesus’ day and reflected for quite a while on the way in which Jesus meets us in the commonplaces of life. Somehow or other, the preacher failed to tie this passage to the other “signs” in John’s Gospel, or say much about the miracle itself, or reflect on the “glory” theme (with which this passage ends, 2:11) in the Gospel of John, or comment on the many, many ways in which Jesus in John’s Gospel transcends the law, showing himself to be the *true* temple, the *true* vine, the *true* bread of life, and so on—even though the passage carefully mentions that the six stone water pots full to the brim were used for Jewish ceremonial washings, and that it was Jesus’ word that brought about the miraculous transformation, not observance of the law. Moreover, the miracle itself prepares the way for the declaration, in the next chapter, that Jesus himself is the bridegroom: the miracle anticipates the messianic banquet. All of this and more was left out. The preacher’s comments could not legitimately be charged with false doctrine. They could have been legitimately slipped into a faithful sermon. But as it was, they made the “exposition” merely trivial.

It would be easy to add additional perennial challenges to the preacher’s responsibility. But it is high time to focus a little more closely on the topic assigned me.

Some Twenty-first-century Challenges

The following list of six entries is exhaustive neither in quantity nor in quality—i.e., it would be easy to add additional entries to the list, and it would be easy to expand each entry considerably. Moreover, even these six reflect my own primary geographical and cultural location. I have visited many parts of the world in which the challenges to the twenty-first century pulpit look rather different. So part of the purpose of the rest of this essay is modest: to stimulate thinking that will help others flesh out this list and modify it for different cultural locations.

Multiculturalism

Transparently, the move toward multiculturalism is not evenly distributed. There are numerous rural pockets in the United States that have been largely untouched by what is almost a global phenomenon; there are entire countries that have experienced little of the phenomenon of mixed ethnicities (e.g., Japan in the industrialized world and some parts of the still-developing Two-Thirds World). Nevertheless the multiplication of ethnic diversity in our major metropolitan centers around the world is one of the most dramatic changes of the past fifty years. For this reason, ministry in New York City has more in common with ministry in Toronto, London, and Berlin than it does with ministry in Franklin, Tennessee.

In some cities the pace of this change has been stunning. A bare three decades ago, Toronto was still largely white and at least substantially WASP. Now the United Nations says it is the most ethnically and culturally diverse city on the continent—and that includes Los Angeles. Moreover, many major cities that have been immune from such transformation are losing their immunization. Two years ago I spent a pleasant couple of hours walking the streets of Bratislava. Accustomed as I am to the sights and sounds of Western Europe, I was struck, once again, by how mono-racial and mono-cultural a Central European city like Bratislava was. I think I counted three black faces. Similar things could be said a few years ago of Prague and other major cities of the countries of the former Eastern block. But now that so many of these countries have joined the European Union, the entailments for immigration are incalculable. I suspect that within a decade or two Bratislava will be almost as multicultural as London, Paris, Brussels, and Rome. Cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town may not have exactly the same distribution of nonnationals, but they, too, are becoming more and more diverse.

The reasons for such changes are many. Increased mobility, the relative ease of travel and its relative inexpensiveness, the massive movements of refugees on the one hand and of those seeking a better economic way of life on the other (while America has about twelve million undocumented Hispanics, South Africa has just under three million undocumented citizens of Zimbabwe—and similar statistics could be charted in many countries), all play their part. In Europe, one of the most significant pressures undergirding these developments is demographic: not a single European country has a birthrate of 2.1 or higher.²

2. One may not always like the sometimes sassy and savagely funny analysis of Mark Steyn, *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It* (Washington DC: Regnery, 2006), but it is difficult to ignore the plethora of documented statistics.

The influx of international guest workers drafted to keep the economies moving invariably has far higher birthrates (e.g., Europe as a whole, about 1.35; Muslims in Europe, about 3.5). Mathematics does the rest. Already there are more worshipers of Allah on any weekend in the United Kingdom than there are Christian worshipers (even with the broadest possible definition of “Christian”); in France, the ratio is now higher than 2.5/1.

Why are such considerations important for the preacher? Certainly I do not want to belong to the doom-mongering crowd. Besides, many of us actually love the diversity now characteristic of many of our big cities. The last thing the church needs in a city like Toronto or New York is a church that hunkers down into ethnically and culturally pure enclaves. That is wrong biblically and stupid strategically. Yet there are at least five facets of these developments that have a bearing on twenty-first-century preachers and preaching.

First, preachers who serve in most of our large urban centers, and even in many small centers, will face increasing cultural diversity in the populace where their church is located. Woe to the church that lags way behind these demographic changes, for it is destined to become a narrow (and narrow-minded) enclave, instead of joyfully anticipating the day, in the new heaven and the new earth, when men and women from every language and people and nation will gather around the throne. Churches comprised of believers from diverse cultures will include people with different senses of humor, different tastes in food, different views on how to bring up their children, different perspectives on individualism and family identity, different traditions with which they choose to identify themselves. Yet what unites them in Christ Jesus is far richer than what divides them. The preacher sensitive to these changes will be eager to establish a growing, empathetic, and biblically faithful distinction between “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3 NIV) and an immense array of cultural differences over which it is unwise to divide. Perhaps nowhere do such matters become more sensitive than when our children express a desire to marry across racial and cultural divides—a phenomenon occurring with increasing regularity, especially in our coastal cities. How families respond to these pressures quickly discloses where their hearts and values are, not least how much they have been shaped by the gospel.

Second, preachers will have to distinguish between, on the one hand, the empirical pluralism and multiculturalism increasingly characteristic of our big cities, and, on the other, the dogmatic “PC” form of multiculturalism that refuses to make any moral or cultural distinctions. Are we so very sure that the culture of Nazism is morally indistinguishable

from the culture of the Dutch folk who hid so many Jews? We shall want to eschew alike the traditionalism that always sides with our own inherited culture, the sentimental love of the esoteric that always sides with whatever is foreign, and the postmodern blinkers that refuse to allow much moral and cultural distinction and discernment at all. The preacher who is speaking from the whole of the Bible to the whole of human life will not be able to duck such issues.

Third, preachers in these environments need to take extra time to prepare *themselves* for ministry characterized by these challenges. It used to be that the better theological colleges and seminaries required of *missionary candidates* certain courses in cross-cultural communication. Nowadays pastors serving metropolitan areas need similar help. It is important to read up on the major groups in your area; it is even more important to develop friendships among the various people of your area, for such interaction will supplement your reading with experiences that no amount of reading can ever cover. One of the valuable things that pastors can do is spend time with more senior pastors who have already crossed a lot of the bridges, and who are willing to mentor a new generation coming along behind.

Fourth, these developments are generating in preachers the need to revive the debate over the validity or invalidity of “the homogeneous unit” principle. Several decades ago, this principle was especially associated with the name of Donald McGavran, who taught missions at Fuller Seminary. McGavran argued that the gospel advances far more quickly and fruitfully if missionaries and evangelists target discrete ethnic and cultural groups. The countervailing argument was that the New Testament demands one unified people of God drawn from all races and cultures—in short, that McGavran’s formula was a betrayal of the gospel itself.

Thus cast, the two outlooks allow no common ground. In fact, some common ground is possible. Evangelistic outreach may demand special sensitivity to definable groups: Paul himself could make himself a Jew to Jews, a Gentile to Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:19–23), with the aim of by all means saving some. What Paul will not sanction is that once they are converted, people may constitute churches separated by race or culture: the church in Antioch must be made up of both Jews and Gentiles. A church that begins, say, an outreach Bible study into the Greek community nearby, or into the Mandarin-speaking community, may be working faithfully. But faithfulness equally mandates that the church attempt to bring disparate people together under the lordship of Christ. One can sympathize with immigrant churches that cater to folk of similar language and culture. On the long haul, however, the prior-

ity of preserving the language and culture can easily trump the gospel itself—and in any case the second or third generation is going to start voting with their feet unless attempts are made to integrate with at least some larger parts of the broader culture. All of these things a preacher must think through as he plans a course of teaching and preaching in a complex, multicultural city.

Fifth, in some geographical locations special thought must be given to the very large groups of one kind of new immigrant: often (in North America) various Hispanic groups; often (in many cities in Europe, and in some places in North America) the Muslim population. In other words, addressing something abstract like “multiculturalism” may actually become an excuse for *not* thinking through the impact of *specific* cultures in our own neighborhoods.

Rising Biblical Illiteracy

The reasons for this illiteracy are many, of course, and have often been probed. This is not the place to review those reasons again. Yet few observers would deny the phenomenon, however unevenly it may be distributed. Two years ago I was giving some fairly academic lectures in Paris. Students had distributed handbills announcing the content, and a young woman living on a boat on the Seine came across a handbill and decided to attend. The first lecture included a lot of historical allusions to major figures in Western Christendom; the second lecture was much more focused on the Bible. The woman came and chatted after the second lecture. She told me she followed the first address much better than the second; because she was a young lass, she had attended a Catholic school where she had been exposed to the thought of Augustine and others, even though she had never found out much about the Bible. But I am quite sure that for every Parisienne who could follow even the first lecture, there are many more for whom both the Bible and subsequent church history are pretty much closed books.

I have sometimes said that when I began doing university missions more than three decades ago, the atheists I met were mostly *Christian* atheists—i.e., the God in whom they did not believe was the Christian God, which is a nice way of saying that the conceptual categories were still largely on my turf. Nowadays one cannot count on even this minor alignment. Most university students are so utterly ignorant of the Bible today that the responsible preacher cannot make biblical allusions without unpacking them and cannot use biblically “loaded” words without explaining them. Even the smallest subset of our cherished Christian vocabulary—grace, faith, God, sin, atonement, resurrection, and the

like—is either a list of meaningless expressions or will prove to be deeply misunderstood by the folk we are addressing. A preacher who is able to proclaim the gospel only to believers who are already deeply Christianized in vocabulary and concept will not be able to proclaim the gospel to people who are not only ignorant of basic biblical content and terminology, but who have already adopted stances toward spirituality and religion that are deeply at odds with what the Bible says. We are not simply writing fresh data on the blank hard drives of their minds; we are required to help them erase certain files and parts of files that clash irremediably with the truth of Scripture that we are trying to write onto their minds. These are challenges that exerted few pressures on most Christian preachers in the Western world a bare half-century ago.

Shifting Epistemology

The word *postmodern* and its cognates have come to mean slightly different things to different groups of people, and in particular to mean different things in different countries. In France, for example, people do not speak of postmodernism precisely because the “ism” suffix suggests a stability that the movement itself disavows. Even the preferred word *postmodernity* is nowadays rarely used, in part because the movement called postmodernity was closely tied to certain literary and philosophical commitments that are no longer *de rigueur* in French intellectual circles. By contrast, in America the French postmoderns of a generation ago are still being read in translation. Here everyone talks happily about *postmodernism* and the presses keep churning out a disheartening number of books on the subject.

Although some have tried to tie postmodernism to anti-consumerism and other current agendas, most concur that in much of the Anglo-Saxon world the heart of the issue is epistemology. “Hard” postmoderns exaggerate the difference between moderns and postmoderns, depicting the former as being fixated on certainty, infatuated with propositions, invariably arrogant and intolerant, and largely blind to the ambiguities and artistry of life. By contrast, postmoderns recognize the relativity of all truth claims, embrace the wide possibilities of a word like “truth,” approach other groups with tolerance and cultural sensitivity, and embrace the subtleties and complexities of life. The caricature intrinsic to these stereotypes may be laughable to serious historians, but millions buy into it. More importantly, “soft” postmoderns avoid the worst antitheses but insist nevertheless, not inaccurately, that there are only two kinds of perspectivalists: those who admit it and those who don’t. Only Omniscience is not burdened with being a perspectivalist. Moreover, many

hold that perspectivalism so limits our capacity to know very much with certainty that firmly held beliefs are read as narrow-minded dogmatism, theological exclusivism is taken to be intolerance, and most moral distinctions must remain nothing more than private preferences.

At very least we must see that the focus of interest has changed. It used to be that someone giving evangelistic addresses on a university campus could provide a full-blown defense of the resurrection of Jesus and thereby precipitate discussions about the truthfulness of the Bible's claims. Nowadays it is more likely such a presentation will elicit the entirely tangential question, "Yes, but what about all the Hindus?" There was a time when one could easily talk about sex and its good purposes in God's creation. Nowadays the same presentation will probably call forth the question, "Are you homophobic?" In short, what starts off as the perception of a tectonic shift in epistemology works down into ten thousand small but vital shifts in perspective and priority.

What I must do, then, is outline a handful of ways in which this epistemological shift ought to affect the preacher and his task. I shall mention only four, though many more could be added.

First, it has become more difficult to get across what the Bible says about sin. When more people lived in a world where "right" and "wrong" were widely perceived to be transcultural categories, it was easier to get across something of the enormity of violating the law of God.

Second, the current focus on narrative preaching has rightly broadened the older emphasis on discourse passages from the Bible. If it helps us better handle all the genres of Scripture faithfully and responsibly, it will be to the good. If it merely tips us from one cultural preference (*viz.*, discourse) to another (*viz.*, narrative), we have not gained anything. Indeed, because narrative is intrinsically more hermeneutically "open" than discourse, the move may merely contribute toward moving us away from truth. How much better to remain faithful to biblical truth yet simultaneously focused on Scripture's existential bite.

Third, because for many people in today's world, "faith" and its cognates refer to one's personal, subjective, religious choice—a choice abstracted from any pretensions of public truth—it does no good to encourage people "to believe" unless one explains what "to believe" means, how important the object of belief is (see I Corinthians 15), and how faith and truth relate to each other. Many such links were simply presupposed by our hearers several decades ago. Few of the links are today culturally presupposed.

Fourth, the structure of apologetics needs to change somewhat. A great deal of the earlier intra-evangelical debates about presuppositionalism and evidentialism were themselves parasitic, in whole or in part, on the subject-object distinction as it developed in the modern period. That debate today takes on a raft of new emphases with the move to various kinds of postmodernism.

Each of these four points could easily be developed into a long chapter. Thoughtful Christians will not want to align entirely with either modernism or postmodernism, of course, but the kindness of God in his “common grace” ensures that there are useful things in both epistemological structures that a Christian may usefully exploit, and things in both structures to confront.

The last three points—multiculturalism, rising biblical illiteracy, and shifting epistemology—combine to remind us that challenges like these are not new. When Paul preaches the gospel in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13), he does not sound exactly the way he does when he preaches the gospel to biblically illiterate intellectuals in Athens (Acts 17). On any reckoning, Paul has been in the ministry for more than two long decades when he preaches in Antioch. He is not shifting his message because he is intimidated. Rather, he recognizes that he is now in another cultural “world” than the one he inhabited when preaching in a synagogue. He perceives that the biblical illiteracy in Athens, combined with such alien frames of reference as Stoicism and Epicureanism, means he must start farther back and talk about monotheism, creation, who human beings are, the aseity of God, the nature of idolatry, and a view of history that includes teleology and final judgment, before he can help his hearers make sense of Jesus and the resurrection.

Integration

This category needs a little unpacking. What I have in mind is the need for Christian preachers so to think through God’s Word that they can wrestle discerningly, penetratingly, critically, and integratively with the manifold movements and cultural (including moral and ethical) questions of the day. This does *not* mean that the agenda of an age becomes the preacher’s agenda. It means, rather, that we must not pretend we can preach the Bible in a cultural vacuum.

Most of us have met preachers who have spent years of their lives reading the Puritans (or the Reformers, or the Fathers) and little else, and whose entire imaginations are locked in a time warp several centuries old. They should not deter us from reading history, of course:

history opens our eyes to other cultures, introduces us to brothers and sisters in other times and places, and weaves depth and perspective into our lives. Nevertheless, we must address the challenges of *our* time and place. Preachers whose every point of integration and application springs from the Donatist controversy or the debate over Socinianism or the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes or the legitimacy or otherwise of the Hooker principle, but who never address abortion and other sweeping bioethical issues congregating around the beginning of life and the end of life, are living in the wrong century.

At a time when internet porn now outsells cigarettes, booze, and hard drugs combined, when digital worlds open up new horizons and yet shut down human intimacy, when globalization reminds us that we are one world and yet sometimes exploits the weak, when AIDS threatens tens of millions of human beings, and when Islam, fueled by oil, strengthened by demographic trends, and disgusted by the immorality of the West, is once again resurgent, the preacher who never demonstrates how the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses these things has, at best, retreated to an individualistic form of piety not sanctioned by the biblical prophetic tradition.

Christian preachers are not authorized to duck important issues. At the same time, these issues must not determine his message. Yet failure to show the bearing of the gospel on such issues is merely to trumpet that there is no bearing. Our task, then, is to be expositors of the Word of God yet to exercise that ministry in the time and place where God has providentially placed us.

Pace of Change

At the beginning of this essay I briefly drew attention to some of the changes that took place in the twentieth century. The pace of change in that century was staggering. But virtually all quantifiers promise that the pace of change in the twenty-first century will accelerate and prove to be far more rapid.

At one level, of course, this should matter little to the preacher. We deal in eternal realities. Indeed, endless analysis about change and its pace may distract us from the eternal gospel, the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” Nevertheless, our task is to communicate the truth of God’s words, which are forever settled in heaven, to men and women who very much live on earth—a rapidly changing earth. What this suggests is that along with the primacy the preacher must give to the study of Scripture and ancillary disciplines, he must also set aside time to try to understand his own times. This may be done through

reading, discussion groups of various sorts (e.g., analyzing books and films), seminars with the most experienced and insightful preachers, and much more. But to ignore the pace of change is to lust after a false security, the security of stability, that will not characterize any part of the twenty-first century.

Modeling and Mentoring

For much of the last three decades my primary task has been to teach students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I have sometimes said that if, God forbid, I were suddenly appointed evangelical Pope, the first thing I would do on my first day in office would be to bring ten or fifteen of the ablest pastor-preachers to churches within a short driving distance of Trinity. The reason is obvious: a great many things are better caught than taught. I wish more of our students were exposed to great preaching. Some of the most important lessons I have learned about preaching have been gleaned by sitting under the ministry of able preachers.

This suggests we ought to be thinking hard about mentoring and apprenticeships. Various organizations, such as The Proclamation Trust in the United Kingdom, have developed preaching workshops that devote time to (a) listening to able preachers, and to (b) mutual criticism of sermon outlines that each participant prepares in advance. Other networks prepare preachers for urban ministry or cross-cultural ministry. The apostle Paul understands how much of his own *life* must shape Timothy (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:10–11). Considering the challenges ahead of us, preachers are more likely to multiply their fruitfulness if they pay attention to the importance of mentoring than if they persist in “Lone Ranger” ministries all their days.

Concluding Reflections

It would be easy to conjure up more trends unwinding before us in the twenty-first century that will have some bearing on preachers and their task. Preachers cannot responsibly ignore these things, for they stand between the speaking God and the listening people—people who are not empty ciphers but culturally located men and women who must be addressed where they are, even if our hope and prayer is that they will not remain where they are, but begin by God’s grace the march down the King’s highway, the narrow road that leads to life.

Challenges for the Twenty-first-century Pulpit

Our motivation to understand and address people in the twenty-first century is not to domesticate the gospel by constant appeal to cultural analysis, but to prove effective ambassadors of the Sovereign whose Word we announce. For one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 11:15). It is precisely because we are anchored in eternity that we are so utterly resolved, like Paul, to address lost men and women who must one day meet their God.