

PREACHING THAT PERSUADES IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

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## **Introduction**

Preaching has always been essential and even more in this postmodern and secular age. Our "contemporary circumstances demand that preaching should be provocative, challenging, and innovative if it [is] going to be engaging."<sup>1</sup> This means, for preaching to achieve its objectives in this postmodernist era it has to be persuasive and engaging. Persuasive preaching in the modern era would have meant reasoning with people through the facts to lead towards an objective conclusion. However, in these postmodern times, absolute truth is rejected, feelings and relativism have replaced reasoning, there is skepticism and cynicism towards authority, and foundationalism is rejected. Thus, this redefines the task of persuasive preaching. What then is persuasive preaching in this postmodern world?

## **What Is Preaching That Persuades in a Postmodern Context**

Preaching that persuades is the one that is Christ centered. Post modernism is marked by a new interest in spirituality. This is demonstrated by the current attraction towards the New Age and Eastern religions.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of the postmodernist lies a vacuum for God and a sense for spirituality. It is only Christ that will fill this vacuum and satisfy this hunger. A preaching without Christ at the centre presents a message that is void of the substance it purports to offer. This will disappoint the postmodernist and will lead to a failure of preaching to achieve its objective.

Preaching that persuades must be authoritative. As K.A Beville puts it, the "postmodernists are suspicious of truth claims, especially when they consider them to be the opinions of an individual."<sup>3</sup> For preaching to be persuasive, it must find its roots, principles,

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. Beville, *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 119.

<sup>2</sup> Ajith Fernando, "The Uniqueness of Christ" in *Telling the Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 130.

<sup>3</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 88.

themes and applications from Scripture. The scripture is what gives the preacher his authority. This is essential because the truth the preacher attempts to convey is "not the preacher's own, but the truth claims of God."<sup>4</sup> The postmodernist rejects absolute truth because he finds it as a tool for manipulation and oppressing the weak. Preaching becomes persuasive if the truth proclaimed originates and it is drawn from Scripture.

Preaching that persuades is the one done as an act of worship. When preaching is seen as act of worship, it affects the studies and preparations for the sermon. In addition, "if we keep in our mind as we prepare and proclaim, [that preaching is an act of worship,] our preaching will truly be an act of worship to the glory of God and the edifying of his people."<sup>5</sup>The postmodernist is more "feelings" based and hence will want to feel a connection with God through the sermon. This is only achieved when preaching is done as an act of worship. As John Piper rightly notes, "the grand design of the Christian preacher is to restore the throne and the dominion of God in the souls of men."<sup>6</sup> Preaching becomes persuasive if it is done as an act of worship.

Preaching that persuades is inductive in its proclamation. Inductive preaching "begins where the hearers are and works toward the proposition which may or may not be stated."<sup>7</sup> It draws the listeners into the sermon from the onset and moves along with them. It arrives at the same conclusion the listener would arrive and hence the preacher does not assume much authority or draw out his own conclusion. This is important especially to the postmodernist. As Beville points out, postmodernists "tend to reject authority and absolutes, fearing that the opinions of

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<sup>4</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Dynamics of Preaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 102.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 2Rev Ed ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 1998), 23-24.

<sup>7</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 96.

others may be biased by power structures. Inductive preaching allows them to arrive at the truth without feeling that some proposition has been imposed on them from an authority figure."<sup>8</sup>

Preaching that persuades is one that affects both the head and the heart. Postmodernism rejects the rationalism that characterized the modern era and hence preaching must transcend the head and touch the heart as well. A sermon touches both the head and the heart if it goes beyond rationalization and takes a relational approach. Such preaching "relates with real life and human experiences, it respects the opinions of the hearers, focuses on the human needs of the hearers at a personal level."<sup>9</sup> People can see themselves in such a sermon and relate with it at a personal level. Preaching that persuades in these postmodern days, must not be abstract, dry and dusty, but must be personal, relational and practical-it should affect both the mind and heart. It should be heavy on application and answer the "and so what" question. It does not only tell what God has said, but what must be done and how it should be done.<sup>10</sup>

Preaching that persuades is interesting. An interesting sermon is the one that "targets a specific felt need."<sup>11</sup> Postmodernists also have for belonging, a need for hope and certainty. An interesting sermon is geared towards meeting such needs. In addition, an interesting sermon is well organized, coherent in its thoughts, and has a clear meaning. In addition, it is rich in illustrations, windows and it is engaging. The postmodernist must have all their senses engaged in preaching to sustain their interest to the very end. As postmodernist turn away from meta narratives and employ deconstruction and hermeneutic of suspicion, an interesting sermon draws

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<sup>8</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 104.

them into the sermon and they are able to make the necessary application to their lives. A persuasive sermon has "the three essential elements of a sermon, truth, clarity and passion."<sup>12</sup>

Preaching that persuades is built on the integrity of the preacher. The preaching that persuades does not seek to manipulate, pressurize, or exploit his hearers.<sup>13</sup> Also, the preacher must be seen to be passionate and an adherent of the message being preached. The message must be borne out of the spirit of the preacher and sincerity with love must accompany the sermon. The preacher must not be viewed as an authoritarian imposing his convictions but as someone genuinely interested in the transformation of the lives of his listeners. Although preaching should be boldly done, there should be humility. The preacher must preach as a frail, mortal man preaching the word of a holy God. The preacher must show respect to the listeners by engaging them in a 'dialogue'. Such a character will win over the postmodernist.

Finally, preaching that persuades is the one that is anointed of God. When people come to hear the preacher preach, what they are essentially looking for is God and his word. Without the anointing of the Holy Spirit, preaching becomes like a great seminar. As Martin Lloyd Jones rightly remarks, "true preaching [preaching that persuades], after all, is God acting. It is not just a man uttering words; it is God acting."<sup>14</sup> Preaching that persuades must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Conclusion**

There is still hope for preaching in this postmodern era. Preaching can still be done persuasively. Preaching that persuades is a perfect harmony of three elements-the word, the integrity of the preacher and finally the emotions of the listeners.

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<sup>12</sup> John Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (London: Hodder, 1998), 284.

<sup>13</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ*, 113.

<sup>14</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, ed. Kevin de Young (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 108.

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