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CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?
EFFECTIVE PREACHING IN A POST-CHURCH CULTURE

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENT
FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE

BY
RANDALL D. AHLBERG

MAY 2019

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First of all, I thank God for the grace he has extended to me. Not only has Jesus died for the forgiveness of my sins, but his grace allows flawed and broken people such as me to proclaim his goodness. It is always a wonder to me that he uses the broken to speak of his perfection. Thanks be to God.

Aside from salvation, the greatest grace extended to me is my wife, Sandy. She has been my cheerleader throughout this process and has graciously turned a blind eye to the list of repairs that need to be done around the house that I have neglected while completing this project. She is the best, and our four children would agree with me. I am also thankful for each of them and the input they have given me related to what kind of preaching is effective in their own lives and the lives of people they know and love. Sarah (and John), Katie (and Chuck), Mark and Abby, thank you for your patience in teaching me.

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ABSTRACT

This project addressed the need for preaching principles that more effectively communicate to those in the current cultural realities. In response to this problem the researcher examined the ways the apostle Paul contextualized his message to his various audiences, comparing and contrasting his approach to the culture he was addressing. The researcher reviewed literature on effective pulpit communication, focusing specifically on gaining a clearer understanding of the cultural context of today. He also investigated the actual biblical knowledge level of those in the vicinity of his church, Constance Evangelical Free Church. He interviewed three preaching pastors in the area to gain their perspectives on preaching in 21st century America and he has interviewed new attendees at Constance who are either engaging or reengaging their faith journey to further understand their perspectives. Finally, in processing all of the above information, the researcher developed a set of principles that will equip preachers to better communicate to their current audiences.

Preaching has always been an integral part of the Church gathered. While the message of the preacher is timeless, his/her audience is ever changing, influenced deeply by the culture of which they are a part. In this regard, the job of the preacher is to become not only familiar with the text that is to be preached but also the audience to whom the message is delivered. The researcher is one of the teaching pastors at Constance Free Church and did a qualitative study among newer attendees to discern how well the preaching at Constance has intersected with their level of biblical literacy and their

cultural perspectives. The researcher then developed principles of communication to give other preachers insight into preaching in the culture of our day.

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of the early Church, people have been gathering in the name of Jesus to worship and to learn of his ways. People have understood that there is something powerful in the spoken Word of God that has the ability to not only influence the mind but to draw people into a process of conversion and transformation. Since the truths of God are timeless, there are many ways in which the preacher of today should be delivering the same message that has been preached for literally thousands of years. However, good communication is not only a matter of a person speaking clearly, but of another person, the listener, being able to understand the message with clarity.

When missionaries arrive in different cultures, they begin a rigorous process of learning the native language of the people and the culture of their new land. They live with eyes wide open to see what unique cultural aspects there might be so that they can present the message of Christ in a way that is as clear and as understandable as possible. This is normal and expected practice.

The one exception to this practice of contextualizing the gospel of Christ seems to be for some in the American Church of today. It is as if some preachers expect their listeners to have a high level of biblical knowledge that only needs to be expanded and a deep commitment to Judeo-Christian ethics that will support the preacher's truth claims. However, the world has changed in dramatic ways. The average person in American culture no longer believes in absolutes and the same could be said for many who sit in church pews. Sadly, there are people who sit in church services week after week who are

not able to name the first book of the Bible, much less identify the themes of Genesis.

The preacher in America needs to act more like a missionary. If the preacher assumes that people in America hold values they do not hold, he/she will soon be answering questions no one is asking.

This project has taken a look at the culture of 21st century America to see what changes need to be considered for preachers to do a better job of communicating God's truths. The researcher lives in central Minnesota, so the research will be most applicable for this culture. However, the principles will certainly have application to the United States in general. The researcher's assumption is that our culture struggles with biblical illiteracy and is a culture deeply shaped by postmodern thinking. Therefore, those who desire to be understood will adopt new communication practices in telling the old, old story.

CHAPTER ONE: SPEAKING TO OUR EVER-CHANGING CULTURE

Statement of the Problem

The problem this project addressed is the need for preachers to continue to learn the current cultural realities of their changing world. For preachers who count their years in ministry by decades instead of years, there are several temptations to be aware of. One temptation for the preacher is to assume that as he/she continues to study the Bible and to become more fluent in scriptural themes that the congregation is on the same accelerated track of learning. A second temptation for the preacher is to assume that the methods they learned for effective communication when in seminary are still the best practices. A final temptation to mention is to assume that the culture they once studied and learned is the same as the cultural mindset of those currently in their congregation and community. There is an ongoing need for the preacher to be studying homiletics and to be active in contextualizing their message to the listener of today.

Definition of Terms

Bible-based Sermons– Sermons that are built on a passage or concept stated as truth in the Bible.

De-churched– A term used to describe those who attended church at one time, perhaps as a child, but have not been attending any church for several years.

Faith Journey– The broad term that would include all the reasons that a person may attend church, acknowledging the fact that the person is trying to deepen their spiritual dimension.

Missional– The current term used to refer to a church being “on mission” in terms of reaching people who are further from Christ as opposed to existing for the purpose of perpetuating the organization as is.

Modern Era– Referring to the period of history from roughly 1700 until 1970.

Modernism– In part, marked by a commitment to rational thought, the importance of information, and a commitment to verifiable knowledge.

Nones– A term identifying the growing segment of the American population who identify themselves as “none of the above” when it comes to choosing a religious affiliation.

Post-Christian– The way many are identifying American culture as opposed to the perception of America following the decades after WWII.

Post-church Culture– The reality that “church” is no longer the anchor of our value systems and no longer a priority as marked by our attendance.

Postmodern Era– Referring to the period of time from roughly 1970 to the present.

Postmodernism– The key elements as related to this study are the distrust of power-based institutions, a disillusionment with simple answers, and a belief that knowledge is more than a rationale process. . .one that includes how we experience reality.

Post-truth– The understanding that American culture no longer believes in a concept of truth that can be verified or determined as universal or absolute.

Unchurched– A broad term referring to all people who do not attend church.

Unconnected– referring to those who may claim a church affiliation but are not connected to the life of a church. This would include those who attend less than five times a year.

Delimitations

This project was limited to the specific cultural setting of a large evangelical church located in a northern suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The focus of the research was on adjusting our communication methods based on the perspectives and biblical knowledge levels of the audience and did not attempt to suggest either the causes of biblical illiteracy or suggest any potential solutions to biblical illiteracy. In addition, this project did not address communication issues in preaching to those who are under 18.

This project did not attempt to determine any correlations between biblical knowledge and church attendance, nor did it attempt to suggest there is a relationship between biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity.

Finally, this project did not address the question of whether the purpose of the corporate church service is primarily for the spiritual maturing of those who already are followers of Christ or whether the church service is to be designed with an eye for those who are not followers of Christ.

Assumptions

This project worked from an assumption that a Bible-based sermon is still a viable form of communication and a vital part of the corporate services of a healthy church. It also assumed that, at least in Minnesota culture, a new person's first experience with a church service will be on a weekend service that includes a sermon. A third assumption is

that most communicators tend to assume that people know more than they do.¹ As such, without specific attention to the contrary, a preacher will assume the average person in their congregation knows more than they actually do. A fourth assumption is that the burden of effective communication falls primarily on the speaker. While the listener does have a responsibility to engage, the speaker can either make that very difficult or much easier.

Subproblems

The first subproblem was to examine the ways the apostle Paul communicated with his various audiences. Specifically, the researcher compared and contrasted the preaching content the apostle Paul used when speaking to a culture that had many gods, such as Athens (Acts 17),² and how that was different when preaching to the audience at Iconium composed of Jews and other people who were monotheistic (Acts 13).

The second subproblem addressed was to gain understanding from literature written on effective communication as related to a cultural context. Some of the specific topics reviewed were the postmodern shift from what is considered authoritative, the diminishing importance of church attendance, and how these things affect the person listening to a sermon. Determining how our culture has changed in the last generation will help identify the best way to approach the task of biblical preaching.

The third subproblem explored was the level of biblical knowledge of those entering or reengaging church and their attitudes toward our preaching practices. The researcher was able to interview people at Constance Evangelical Free Church who were

¹ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007).

² Unless noted otherwise, Bible quotations in this paper are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

coming from a minimal church background, and analyzed and synthesized their responses. The researcher was also able to gain information on those who live in our community from a survey regarding their level of biblical knowledge. The researcher also interviewed three local preaching pastors to gain their perspectives and insights. All this material was then used to address the fourth subproblem, that of identifying a set of preaching principles that will enhance the effectiveness of communicating to our target audience.

Setting of the Project

The researcher is on staff at Constance Evangelical Free Church, located in Andover, Minnesota. Andover is a far northern suburb of Minneapolis/St. Paul and is a highly desirable place to live for families due in part to its quality school systems. Residents are primarily Caucasian, hard-working, financially and politically conservative, and highly educated. In the last 25 years there has been significant new construction of housing in Andover and, as the population of the area has grown, so has Constance. Currently, weekend attendance at Constance is roughly 1,500 and the church has solid and stable leadership in place. By most every metric, Constance is a healthy church.

The growing concern of church leadership is that while Constance has been an attractive choice for churched people moving into the area, the rate of conversion growth has been less than desired. Over the last five years there has been a sharpening of the leadership's focus on evangelism, encouraging the congregation to be more intentional in sharing their faith with their neighbors. There have also been conversations on a leadership level concerning what can be done to make Constance church services more accessible to those who have minimal church exposure.

Currently, Constance has three pastors who do the majority of communicating on Sunday mornings. Two of those three speakers, including the researcher, are in their sixties.

Importance of the Project

Importance of the Project to the Researcher

First of all, the researcher has always been interested in being an effective communicator. From being involved in school plays and dramas to preaching, he has been looking for ways to effectively communicate for over 50 years. In all such venues, it is the audience that determines whether the communication has been effective. As one who is now in a position of being able to communicate the importance of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is a continual burden to communicate the truths of God as clearly as possible.

Another reason this project is deeply important to the researcher is that he has children and other relatives who are in their thirties, some of whom attend Constance. In conversations with them, it is obvious that there have been times when the preaching at Constance falls short of connecting well with their needs. While there were several reasons they articulated, one was that there are times when the preachers have assumed their listeners know more than they do. For example, it wasn't long ago when the sermon was on John the Baptist that a close relative asked with all honesty, "Why do they call him 'The Baptist'?" Obviously, it was assumed this was common language, but it was not known. There was a movement in past years to be careful of using "church" words such as atonement, sanctification, and regeneration. It would seem the lack of biblical

knowledge is much wider and deeper than such technical theological language. The current cultural reality is that many basic Bible stories are no longer known.

Finally, as a communicator who is now in his sixties, the researcher is painfully aware of the gaps that need to be bridged between himself and listeners in their thirties. Illustrations from songs or movies from 20-30 years ago can simultaneously be effective for an older person but distancing for the person who was not yet born. In addition, the researcher has a growing awareness of significant changes in how people hear and process information. Being an effective communicator requires one to be in a posture of learning for a lifetime.

The Importance of the Project to the Immediate Ministry Context

This project can be of great value to Constance. The church vision statement has been recently updated to “Helping People Connect with Jesus.” Since the church has not been seeing as many decisions for Christ over the last ten years as it would like, the leadership of the church is in the process of evaluating every aspect of ministry so that evangelism is a matter of first importance. The church leadership desires to eliminate any unnecessary barriers for those far from Christ. At times, it seems there has been a disconnect between the sermons that have been preached and the desired audience. Having more information about the perceptions, biases, and the biblical knowledge of our listeners will help the teaching pastors sharpen the focus of their preaching.

The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large

A generation ago, communicators like Billy Graham used a standard line in every sermon: “The Bible says.” He spoke to a generation that still held some basic beliefs that there is a God and that the Bible is worth considering. Holding up the Bible and stating

again what the Bible says on matters of life and eternity was an effective means of communication. Currently, there are conversations and debates in some church circles that are not concerns of the laity. Out of love for the truth of God's Word, some communicators have focused on the nuanced views of a John Piper and how they are different from those of an N.T. Wright. While these matters may indeed be important, the evangelical church is in danger of spending our time and energy answering questions that the average person in the pew is not asking. For the person who is not a follower of Jesus, it is not that our message is being resisted, but that it is being dismissed as being irrelevant. If a preacher begins with the assumption that his or her audience knows the basics of the Bible story and accepts the writings of the Bible as being authoritative, the message has little chance of being received in a cultural that does not hold such values. For those who want to preach, it is imperative that they not only keep their finger on the text of the Bible, but that they keep their eyes and ears on the changing world of today. This project has attempted to give some insight into some of the fundamental ways that our culture has changed in the way they believe and the way they think.

The Research

This project was qualitative in nature. It is primarily a case study research project. This approach to research was used due to its investigative flexibility, being able to bring several different kinds of data into this project.

Project Overview

The research began with a study of the Book of Acts and materials giving insight into the context of Paul's preaching in various contexts. Then, the researcher read current literature as related to preaching in our current culture, the effects of Postmodernism on

how people might process information differently than a generation ago and reading material on our current level of biblical illiteracy in America.

The second step in this process was to gather data from a survey of people from the community, many who do not attend Constance. This survey was used to gain an accurate understanding of the level of biblical knowledge of those in our specific locale. The survey also provided a means of comparing the attendance patterns of the respondents with their level of biblical knowledge.

The third step in this research was to form a questionnaire that could identify how those with minimal church background connect with our preaching. A specific area of emphasis is whether there were times that helped them connect with the message and if there were times when the preacher assumed he or she knew something about the Bible they didn't know. This questionnaire was then administered by the researcher and/or his volunteers. The data from these interviews was then transcribed and coded in way to determine what steps could be taken to make our preaching more visitor accessible. Along this same vein of research, three local preaching pastors were interviewed to gain insight into how they attempt to connect their preaching to those who attend with minimal biblical knowledge.

Finally, the researcher analyzed these streams of data and then synthesized the data with his own experiences and observations to develop a set of principles for effective preaching to our current cultural context.

CHAPTER TWO: THE APOSTLE PAUL AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Preaching a sermon is a significant part of most church services across America and certainly in the evangelical community. Preaching the Bible as the word of God is deeply embedded in the fabric of what Evangelicals consider a good church service. Throughout the New Testament the proclamation of the “good news” was a priority. It was the priority of Jesus, so much so that in the face of growing popularity and a clamoring for him to do more miracles Jesus told his disciples that it was time to leave and go to other villages “so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). Preaching was also a priority of the early Church. When administrative details began to overwhelm the apostles, they created a new office in the church to handle those needs so the apostles could focus on “prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Preaching was a priority for the Apostle Paul and he passed on that priority to Timothy when he commanded him to “preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2). However, when it comes to the content and structure of sermons, we have few examples and virtually no biblical directives. Therefore, any principles of homiletics discerned will only be gained through careful study of the examples of sermons recorded in the Bible and the purposeful application of any principles observed.

The focus of this study is the issue of contextualization. How much did the various preachers shape and adapt their specific messages to a specific culture? While there is not a specific text commanding contextualization when preaching, the Bible does have examples of biblical communicators shaping their message to address specific

cultures. First of all, it could be argued that the gospel writers were actively involved in contextualization, shaping their respective gospels to their desired audience. Furthermore, Jesus was continually in the process of shaping his message for his listeners. For example, the classic invitation of Jesus to his disciples to “come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19) was made specifically to men who were fishermen. It could be argued that Jesus would have used an entirely different word picture if his first disciples were investment bankers or computer programmers.

This study gave careful attention to the preaching of the apostle Paul as recorded in the Book of Acts. Specifically, there are two longer sermons recorded that Paul preached, one in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and one to a gathering of polytheists in Athens (Acts 17). It is important to take a careful look at each of these sermons, looking at their context, the content, and the results of the messages delivered.

The Sermon Delivered at Pisidian Antioch

The Context

Paul and Barnabas visited Pisidian Antioch very early in their first missionary journey. While their travels began with Barnabas being the leader, their roles had already reversed in Antioch with Paul being the primary speaker and decision maker from this point forward. They arrived in Antioch of Pisidia, a communication center for Asia Minor through which significant east-west traffic passed.¹ Luke, the author of Acts, did not feel it necessary to give details about Antioch other than to record there was a synagogue located there where Paul and Barnabas went on the Sabbath. At the completion of the liturgy of a Hebrew worship service, Paul and Barnabas were invited to

¹ Merrill Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Handbook Revised and Updated* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984), 448.

speak to the assembled worshippers. The leaders responsible for the synagogue would not extend such an invitation unless they had some compelling reason to do so.² Perhaps Paul was recognized as a man who had studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) or was able to give some evidence of his credentials as one qualified to teach in such a setting.

Paul is very specific in his opening statement about the audience he is addressing. His audience was comprised of two groups. The first are the Jews who would be worshipping in a synagogue. The second group is referred to as the “Gentiles who worship God” (Acts 13:16), “God-fearing Gentiles” (Acts 13:26), and as “devout converts to Judaism” (Acts 13:43). It does not seem that either term was a technical title, but would have referred to a person who, like Cornelius (Acts 10:2), was “devout, charitable, familiar with Scripture and obedient to the ethical commandments.”³ While they were ethnically not Jewish, they shared a common belief system. Paul therefore was not able to include them in the address as “fellow Israelites” (Acts 13:26), but was able to include them in the more generic title of “my friends” (Acts 13:38). These God-fearers would already have a worldview that was similar to the Jews, believing there is one God who is actively at work in the redemptive history of humankind.

The Content of the Message

The text recorded in Acts 13 is not a word-for-word transcription of Paul’s message. Luke, the widely accepted author of Acts,⁴ was not physically present in Antioch nor is there reason to believe he had any sort of transcript of Paul’s message.

² Richard Pervo, “Acts, A Commentary,” in *Hermeneia—A Critical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Harold Attridge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 331.

³ Pervo, 332.

⁴ Pervo, 5-12.

Even though these challenges existed for Luke, there is still reason to believe the text gives us a reliable outline of Paul's message. It would also appear that Luke had a certain intention to put Paul's message in a form that would be consistent with patterns found in Greco-Roman rhetoric. Paul's discourse takes on the "character of a piece of deliberative rhetoric, the kind of ancient rhetoric that aims for a change in the belief and behavior of its listeners."⁵ The significance of this structure is that Luke seems to have used it not only to illustrate what the Jewish audience heard from Paul, but what a Greek audience would understand when reading his book. If no one else would be reading his book, certainly the man to whom the book is addressed, Theophilus, would be (Acts 1:1). That Paul would begin his message by standing up and giving a motion with his hand is an additional detail that would mean more to a Greek looking for a presentation of rhetoric than it would mean to a Jew looking for a rabbi's teaching. While Paul was busy contextualizing his message to his Jewish audience, Luke was busy contextualizing this same message to a non-Jewish audience.⁶

Digging into Paul's sermon, there are several aspects that warrant further consideration. First would be Paul's ongoing attempts to identify with his listeners. He begins with "Fellow Israelites" and quickly adds that this is the story of "our" ancestors. Later in the message he again refers to his listeners as "fellow children of Abraham" (Acts 13:26) and reminds them that this message of salvation is sent to "us." Paul stresses his connection with the audience a third time, proclaiming that "what God has promised

⁵ Ben Witherington, *Acts of the Apostle: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 407.

⁶ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 59.

to our ancestors he had fulfilled for us, their children” (Acts 13:32). Paul repeatedly stresses that he is no outsider and wants his audience to know he speaks as one of them.

The second aspect of Paul’s message is the theological foundation he establishes. Paul jumps immediately into the redemption story of God’s relationship with the people of Israel. He is the God who chose the people of Israel to be his. Paul then reminds his listeners of God’s provision while in Egypt and the mighty power by which he delivered them. The provision of God continues through their years in the wilderness into the land he gave them as an inheritance. Paul’s review of history continues through the establishment of the monarchy and finally ends with King David. It is noteworthy that Paul concludes this story of redemption at David. There is an implied line of reasoning that points to a Messiah, but this connection is not clearly stated. His audience of Jews and God-fearers would know they were living in the promise of God to be a great nation. However, as those scattered far from Jerusalem, their beliefs had to be anchored in the promises of God and not in their present experience.

The third dimension of Paul’s message is in one sense the continuation of the theme of God’s redemptive actions with Israel. It is the theme of introducing Jesus as the one who is the fulfillment of everything promised to Abraham.⁷ There are three times this theme is stressed. The first occurrence is in Acts 13:23 when Paul introduces Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise made to David. The second time is when Jesus was crucified (Acts 13:27). Without knowing it, what the prophets wrote was being fulfilled by those who nailed Jesus to the cross. Lastly, the theme of fulfillment comes back into the sermon when Paul states that the resurrection of Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise

⁷ Fleming, 61.

made to their ancestors (Acts 13:32). Jesus is introduced not as a new character in the drama of redemption, but as one who completes the story that began with Abraham being called by God. It would be blasphemy to a good Jew for Paul to introduce Jesus as a new “god,” so Paul had to show the importance of Jesus’ place in the ongoing redemptive story.

The next dimension of Paul’s preaching is the way he uses other Scripture passages to add credibility to his argument. The crux of Paul’s argument is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises related to King David and it is at this point that Paul quotes four different passages from the Hebrew Scriptures (Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 55:3; Psalm 16:10; Habakkuk 1:5). For a Jewish audience that believed in the authority of God’s Word, Paul wisely used Scripture to bolster his arguments concerning Jesus.

Finally, Paul’s message fully includes the life events of Jesus and their significance. Paul includes the story of John the Baptist and his role of pointing to another who would be the Messiah. Paul included in his message that Jesus was sentenced by Pilate, died on a cross, was put in a tomb, was raised to life, and was witnessed by many to be alive. Because of what Jesus has accomplished, the forgiveness of sins could be proclaimed. Paul wanted the audience to know the full role of Jesus and to see that everyone who believes in him is set free from every sin. While it could be argued that a call to repentance is implied, the concept is not present.

The Response

Paul’s message seemed to initially have a generally positive response, both from the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles. Invited to speak again on the next Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas continued on and were prepared to speak again. However, “when the Jews

saw the crowds, there were filled with jealousy” (Acts 13:35). Luke uses this message in Pisidian Antioch to indicate a defining moment in his entire book, where Paul and Barnabas specifically declared their intent to focus on the Gentiles going forward. There is a certain irony that the same message that caused Jewish rejection resulted in a time where “the Gentiles were glad and honored the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:38).

The Sermon Delivered in Athens on the Areopagus

The Context

Paul’s trip to Athens was several years later in his role as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13). He would travel from city to city sharing the good news about Jesus. Even though Paul had committed himself to preach to the Gentiles, his custom (Acts 17:2) was to first of all go to the local synagogue and preach to the primarily Jewish audience. Just prior to coming to Athens, Paul had been in Berea with Silas and Timothy, where they enjoyed a good response to the gospel. However, some troublemakers came and apparently Paul was in more danger than were his traveling companions. The believers “immediately” (Acts 17:14) sent Paul to the coast while Silas and Timothy remained behind. Paul arrived in Athens and was without his companions.

Athens was not the great city it had once been under Alexander the Great, but it was still an important university town known for its intellectual and philosophical pursuits.⁸ For Luke, there would no better city to demonstrate how the gospel would be preached to a pagan and polytheistic world. “Paul’s address to the Athenians in Acts 17 is

⁸ Atef Mehanny Gendy, “Style, content and culture: distinctive characteristics in the missionary speeches in Acts,” *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 99, no. 3 (2011): 256.

perhaps the outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament.”⁹

While Paul was waiting in Athens, he is described as being “greatly distressed” to see that the city was full of idols. Archeologists have unearthed a myriad of idols in Athens proving Paul to be correct. Virtually every Greek god enjoyed their own statue and shrine where worship would be offered. Zeus received prominent status in the city with numerous altars and statues. Over 300 statues of just one deity, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, have been uncovered.¹⁰ Athene, the goddess of wisdom and patron saint of the city, had three temples on the Acropolis, a smaller temple in the marketplace, as well as places of worship in the great Temple of Hephaistos. It is logical that the city named after Athene would pride itself in its intellectual pursuits. In addition to a pantheon of idols and statues dedicated to the Greek gods, the inhabitants of Athens were expected to worship the Roman emperor Caesar as the lord of the world. While other cities that Paul visited were also contaminated with the physical excretions of polytheism, Athens held the dubious honor of being most famous for its idol worship.¹¹

Luke reports the presence of Epicureans and Stoics in Athens , the “two most vigorous and dogmatic philosophical schools of the era.”¹² Epicureanism teaches that pleasure is the goal of living, but the path to true pleasure is found in living in moderation

⁹ Flemming, 72.

¹⁰ Eckhard J Schnabel, “Contextualizing Paul in Athens: the proclamation of the gospel before pagan audiences in the Graeco-Roman world,” *Religion and Theology* 12, no. 2 (2005): 174.

¹¹ Pervo, 426.

¹² Pervo, 425.

and to limit one's desires.¹³ Epicureans believed that humans were mortal, the cosmos was the result of chance, and there is no such thing as a god.¹⁴ Stoicism on the other hand is predominantly a philosophy of personal ethics informed by logic. Virtue is the only good for human beings, and external things such as health, wealth, and pleasure are not good or bad in themselves but find their value in how virtue interacts with each.¹⁵ Paul's sermon interacts with these schools of thought, especially with the Stoics.¹⁶

Paul's message in Athens begins in one arena and concludes in another. The first location was in the marketplace, where Paul would speak with whoever was willing to engage him on a day-to-day basis (Acts 17:17). It was here that some philosophers began to debate with Paul. Based on what Paul was teaching, these philosophers then brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, the second location.

There has been debate over the exact nature of the Areopagus and the full circumstances of Paul's address. Some have concluded that the Areopagus was merely the name of the place where Paul spoke and that the gathering simply offered an invitation to a formal public presentation of his belief system and a debate.¹⁷ In support of this position, the perspective of Luke is that those in Athens "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). Others believe that the Areopagus was a more formal council, one with judicial authority over the

¹³ Frank Gaebelin, editor, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 473.

¹⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 604.

¹⁵ Fitzmeyer, 605.

¹⁶ Fleming, 73.

¹⁷ Schnabel, 175.

religious and cultural climate of the city. With this judicial view of the Areopagus Paul was on trial for introducing new gods into Athens.¹⁸ Even though Athens was very polytheistic, the introduction of any new gods into their culture was considered a capital offense.¹⁹ It does seem that Paul's appearance at the Areopagus was more than a matter of intellectual debate, elevating it to at least the seriousness of a preliminary hearing and perhaps a formal defense against the accusation of introducing a foreign deity into Athens. The language of the text is that Paul was "brought" to the Areopagus, communicating a certain expectation that Paul would speak to this authoritative body.²⁰

The Content of the Message

Paul's message begins with him standing in the middle of the Areopagus, taking the posture and position of one giving a formal presentation. There is some evidence from the eastern Mediterranean world that orators who were asked to make a presentation were usually given a day's notice to prepare.²¹ The text would allow for such a day of preparation. Luke did not mention this but his purpose is clear in writing about this event: he wants to show that Paul was a capable defender of the gospel in a formal Greek judicial setting.

The opening of Paul's message is where he attempts to build rapport and some common ground with his audience. Paul desires to present himself not as an outsider with alien ideas, but as "a fellow traveler in the pursuit of truth and insight."²² His greeting is

¹⁸ Flemming, 73.

¹⁹ Pervo, 425.

²⁰ Pervo, 428.

²¹ Schnabel, 176.

²² Pervo, 429.

polite and he commends them for being very religious. It has been pointed out that the word translated as “very religious” could be translated as “obsessed with demons.”²³ However, it is obvious from the context that Paul intended this phrase as a compliment and that it was received as such. As a skilled orator, Paul is looking for ways to connect with his audience, not to antagonize them.

Paul’s introduction continues with his reference to discovering an altar with an inscription “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23). Such altars were designed as a precaution against possibly offending some anonymous deity. The task of appeasing the gods was taken very seriously and “deities seemed to be easily offended.”²⁴ Paul uses this altar as an opportunity to introduce the concept of the God of the Bible. In using this approach, he was not introducing a new deity, but explaining one they were already worshipping unaware. By way of connection, Paul states clearly that he intends to reveal the identity of this unknown god.

Having done his best to make a positive connection with his audience, Paul presents the heart of his apologetic presentation. His argument centers on God being the creator of everything. Paul does not attempt to prove the existence of God. His presentation assumes it.²⁵ In essence, he is taking the Athenians’ idea of an unknown god and implanting a monotheistic view of there being one God.

Paul identifies several truths about this God: First of all, as the God who has created everything, he doesn’t need a place to “live.” In fact, it is a bit absurd to think of the God who has created everything and everyone to have some human create a temple

²³ Fitzmeyer, 606.

²⁴ Flemming, 202.

²⁵ Pervo, 433.

where he could reside. Paul's argument is that if humans are God's offspring as the Greek poets declare, he doesn't need an image made out of gold and silver any more than humans do. The Epicureans in the crowd would agree with Paul on this point.²⁶ Secondly, Paul's argument is that a deity that is truly God doesn't need anything from us. Instead, humans are dependent on him for life and breath itself. Finally, God takes an active role in history as opposed to one that is passive. The reason he has done this is so that perhaps we would seek him and find him. This line of reasoning would echo with Stoic beliefs about the gods being benevolent.²⁷

Paul uses a rhetorical device throughout his sermon, returning three times to the concept of the "unknown." One can't help but see the effectiveness of speaking of something unknown to an audience who prided themselves in how much they knew. Paul began by referring to the altar of the "unknown" God (Acts 17:23). Then, Paul stated that what is "unknown" to them is known to him. The NIV translates the word as "ignorant," but it comes from the same Greek root word as unknown. The same is true when Paul proclaimed that God will no longer put up with their ignorance (Acts 17:30). In other words, God allowed you to worship him as the unknown but now you have no excuse in doing so. He has been revealed.²⁸ In the past, God allowed humanity to grope around in the darkness for him, but now things have changed.

Another feature of Paul's message in Athens is that he quoted Greek poets to fortify his arguments. The phrase "we are his offspring" has been traced back to Aratus of

²⁶ Schnabel, 180.

²⁷ Schnabel, 179.

²⁸ Lucien Legrand, "The unknown god of Athens: Acts 17 and the religion of the Gentiles" *The Indian Journal of Theology* 30, no. 3-4 (July 1981): 165.

Soli, who had many Stoic influences.²⁹ The phrase “In him we live and move and have our being” is another statement of Stoic religiosity.³⁰ As such, Paul not only demonstrated a knowledge of Greek culture but was also willing to use their pagan sources to add weight to his argument about the nature of God.

Lastly, the name of Jesus was not mentioned in Paul’s sermon. It could be argued that he would have if his message had not been interrupted but Luke is very intentional about what he includes in his writings. In this situation, Paul’s goal at the Areopagus was to prove that his message was not one about a god to add to their pantheon of gods but that there is one God who is creator, provider, and judge.

The Results

The assembled crowd was willing to listen to Paul until he mentioned the resurrection from the dead. At that point, the response of the audience was mixed, with some sneering, some wanting to hear more, and some believing (Acts 17:32-34). While Paul was invited to speak again on the subject, Luke does not report this as happening. Instead, “After this, Paul left Athens” (Acts 18:1). The implication is that Paul’s presentation to the Areopagus did have some judicial ramifications and that if he stayed the proceedings would become more official and more adversarial. Given the adversarial response of those gathered, it was too great a risk for Paul to continue in Athens.

Comparative Contrasts

²⁹ Legrand, 162.

³⁰ Legrand, 163.

In comparing these two sermons of Paul, it is evident that he was deeply aware of his audience and adapted his approach to each. When Paul was speaking to an audience that was in agreement with the Jewish understanding of God, he used a significantly different approach from the way he spoke to a polytheistic audience that had no Jewish foundation.

First of all, Paul approached the two audiences with a totally different point of reference concerning his connection with them. He addressed the Jewish audience as “fellow Israelites” and “fellow children of Abraham.” Paul used the fact of their common heritage in an attempt to communicate that his message was consistent with the teachings of Judaism. In Athens, there was no such common heritage for Paul. Paul therefore took a different approach, telling of his common experiences as a person who also was religious and how they all were the “offspring of God.”

Secondly, Paul approached the two audiences with totally different points of authority. For his Jewish audience, he quoted the Old Testament four specific times and in addition reminded them of the history of the people of Israel as recorded in Scripture. In Athens, Paul did not quote Scripture at all. To do so would not have been helpful to his argument. Instead, Paul quoted some Greek poets, trying to gain acceptance for his message by showing how his sermon held points of logic that were consistent with parts of their worldview. “The genius of Paul’s evangelistic contextualization in Acts 17 is that he intentionally used the philosophical language of this audience, not simply to establish common ground, but in order to transform their worldview.”³¹

³¹ Flemming, 205.

Thirdly, Paul approached the two audiences from totally different points of theological argument. For the Jewish audience in the synagogue Paul began his apologetic presentation with the covenant God made with Abraham and carried that argument through the Exodus and up to the reign of David. His goal was to show that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for, the one of the lineage of David. For his audience in Athens, such an argument would have carried no weight. Instead, Paul began with God as the creator of everything. It was as if Paul believed that it would not be sufficient to talk about Jesus to a polytheistic culture or they would have considered Jesus one more god among many. Therefore, Paul needed to present monotheism before he would be able to present the role of Christ in redemptive history.

Some commentators have been convinced that Paul made a mistake in Athens by trying to reason with the intellectuals on their turf. Paul's time in Athens has even been referred to as a "humiliation."³² Part of the logic of such commentators is that Paul travelled to Corinth immediately after Athens. When Paul would later write to the Corinthians, he stated that he was determined to preach nothing other than Christ and him crucified (I Cor. 2:2). However, a majority of current scholars agree that such a view is "untenable."³³

Finally, Paul approached his two audiences with a different tone in his call for a response. To his Jewish audience, there is no language of repentance, which is quite surprising. Instead, he uses the language of appeal. Having presented that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah and that his death and resurrection is the path to the forgiveness

³² J. C. Macaulay, *Expository Commentary on Acts* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1946), 192.

³³ Legrand, 161.

of sin, Paul's request for a response began with, "I want you to know" (Acts 13:38). In similar manner, his only word of warning is a quotation from Habakkuk, stating they should take care that "what the prophets have said does not happen to you" (Acts 13:40). By contrast, Paul uses stronger language with the Athenians. They will need to repent because God has set a day when he will judge the world. There is not really an "or else" stated, but the warning is clear that there will need to be some significant changes in their belief system in light of this creator God, the unknown which he has now made known.

Comparative Similarities

Having identified the points of contrast in the two sermons, there are some points of consistency between the two deliveries.

First of all, in both contexts Paul assumed the responsibility for connecting with his audience. Practicing effective homiletics, Paul did not expect his audience to meet him on his terms but was willing to look for ways to meet his audience where they were. Particularly in Athens, it would have been tempting for Paul to speak out of how "deeply distressed" he was in this city full of idols (Acts 17:16). Instead of addressing his listeners out of his distress, Paul commented on the religiosity of the Athenians.³⁴

Secondly, in both contexts Paul had crafted a message that would be consistent with the style of the culture he was addressing. In the messages as Luke recorded them, both hold strong elements of Hellenistic rhetoric. While it is logical that Paul's speech in Athens would hold some elements of Greek oratory, it is argued that Paul's message in the synagogue does the same.³⁵

³⁴ Gendy, 261.

³⁵ Witherington, 407.

Thirdly, in both contexts Paul preached a message that addressed the most important theological issue at hand. For the Jewish audience, their challenge would be to accept that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah of God. For the Athenians, the first challenge would be to acknowledge there is one God instead of many. The Athenians have no understanding of Christ or the Scriptures upon which to build an argument. Argument based on the person of Jesus would have made little sense.³⁶

Finally, in both contexts Paul preached to a point of response. Paul's willingness to adapt to his culture didn't mean that he retreated from the truth of his message. Paul's sermon in the synagogue and his sermon before the Areopagus were characterized both by points of agreement and points of contradiction with the views of his listeners.³⁷ Contextualizing his message to his audience did not lessen the need for an adjustment of worldview for his listeners, and Paul did not hesitate to ask for such a change.

³⁶ Fleming, 202.

³⁷ Schnabel, 183.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW ON CULTURAL PREACHING

Followers of Christ have been entrusted with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One would think that communicating this message in a way that it can be clearly understood should not be that difficult. Preachers have had generations to refine their message, building on the work of those who have gone before them. After all, the nature and character of God has not changed since eternity past. The sinfulness of humankind has not changed since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden. The good news of salvation being purchased on the cross of Christ has been established for nearly 2,000 years. With these constant truths as a foundation, the path of clearly communicating the gospel should be well established with no refinements needed. However, there is one variable to effective communication: People change and are changing.

The task of communication involves both one who is a giver of information and one who is a receiver of information. What is true in communication in general is also true when it comes to communicating from the Bible. It is conceded that to be effective in communication one must have a clear understanding of who is the receiver of the information. The adult listener in the United States is always changing and the rate of cultural change has been multiplied over the last 100 years.

American Culture Is Becoming Post-Christian

The cultural landscape of America has changed dramatically in the last 100 years. For example, in the 1920s a science teacher named John Scopes was put on trial for

teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school.¹ Until that time, creationism was the only view worthy of consideration. Obviously, the cultural norms of society have changed.

In the 1960s, Rob and Laura Petrie had separate beds in their bedroom on television, even though they were portrayed as married on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. It was considered to be in bad taste to have two actors who were not married in real life to share a bed. Again, the norms of cultural acceptance have shifted dramatically.

In the 1950s, it was common practice in some public schools to begin the day with the school principal or teacher leading all students in a Christian prayer, regardless of the students' religion. In 1957, a law was passed in a Joint Resolution by the 84th Congress and signed into law by President Dwight Eisenhower that all American currency would include the words "In God We Trust."

One could argue whether America was ever in fact a "Christian" nation, but there were certainly many identifiable actions that would indicate that the typical person in America was at least a God-fearing member of society and probably attended church regularly. Sadly, things have changed.

The purpose of this project was not to identify what went wrong or whether any changes should be attempted through some sort of political process to recapture the past. Instead, the focus was to identify what present realities our churches and church services face.

The first bit of reality to grasp is that the evangelical community is not as large an entity in American culture as some might think. For example, the National Association of

¹ Scopes Trial," *History*, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/scopes-trial>.

Evangelicals used to claim that they represented thirty million individuals in America. Perhaps this number came from wishful thinking or from some polls referring to the number of people who self-identify as being “Christian” or “born again.” However, when research was conducted as to how many people attended the sixty-one denominations affiliated with the NAE, the actual count was 7.6 million.² This bit of reality is important to grasp when one considers the position of an evangelical church in American culture.

The second painful reality in American culture is that church attendance is in decline. *Churchless*, the summary of research by Barna and Kinnaman, confirms that both the number of people attending church and the frequency of those people attending church has declined during the last few decades.³ A 2014 survey revealed that only 49 percent of people attended church at least once a month.⁴ Even when adding the 8 percent of the population who say they attend only on holidays, there is still 43 percent of the population who attend church rarely or never. This is an alarming increase from the year 2000 when 33 percent of those polled stated they rarely or never attended church. “The raw number of unchurched people in the United States is staggering.”⁵ A 2004 survey revealed that on any given weekend, only 17.7 percent of the population attended a church.⁶ At that rate, the average “regular attender” would attend slightly more than once

² John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recessio*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 32.

³ George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless* (Austin TX: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 3.

⁴ Barna and Kinnaman, 6.

⁵ Barna and Kinnaman, 9.

⁶ Rebecca Lowry and Lindy Lowry, “7 Startling Facts: An Up-Close Look At Church Attendance in America,” *Church Leaders*, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

every three weeks. Whatever the cause, church attendance is less than it once was, both in the number of people attending and the frequency of their attendance.

The third reality of American religious culture is related to those who do not attend church. The vast majority of those who self-identify as nonattenders would be classified as “de-churched.”⁷ In other words, they did attend at one time and now no longer attend. In fact, a full 33 percent of the population of America claim to have been active in a church at one time but are no longer involved.⁸ These individuals claim to have firsthand experience with one or more Christian churches and have decided they can better use their time in other ways.⁹ Eighty percent of those who no longer attend church indicated that they did not slide into being churchless but made a conscious decision to no longer attend.¹⁰ Of all the reasons these gave for no longer attending, the number one reason was that they found church to be “boring.”¹¹ The hard reality of these statistics is stated well by Hugh A. Koops:

In America we would like to act as if most people who do not attend church are pre-Christian. . . . They just haven’t heard about Jesus as of yet. The truth of the matter is that many in America are post-Christian. The post-Christian has looked at Christianity and found it wanting. The unique characteristic of home mission work . . . is its presentation of the message to a people who have heard of it before and have rejected what they have heard.¹²

⁷ Barna Group, 12.

⁸ Barna Group, 6.

⁹ Barna Group, 36.

¹⁰ Barna Group, 42.

¹¹ Barna Group, 53.

¹² Hugh A. Koops, “The Challenge of the Post-Christian Age,” *Reformed Journal* 8, no. 4 (April 1958), 14.

The fourth and last painful reality to grasp in relationship to American culture is the low level of biblical knowledge for the average person. G. Shane Morris recently identified in his blogpost three different incidents of biblical illiteracy in the media during the preceding week.

First, the *Wall Street Journal* misquoted Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu as saying that “Moses brought water from Iraq.” ... A piece on Pope Francis at *NPR*’s “Two Way” blog described Easter as “the day celebrating the idea that Jesus did not die and go to hell or purgatory or anywhere at all, but rather arose into heaven.” ... The same day, *NBC*’s Chuck Todd tweeted out this gem: “I’m a bit hokey when it comes to ‘Good Friday.’ I don’t mean disrespect to the religious aspect of the day, but I love the idea of reminding folks that any day can become ‘good,’ all it takes is a little selflessness on our own part. Works EVERY time.”¹³

While such gaffs are almost comical, the issue of biblical illiteracy is a very real phenomenon. The *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* did an extensive survey in 2010. Of those who self-identified as being Christian, only 63 percent could identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible.¹⁴ While 45 percent of the general population could name the four gospels, only 71 percent of those identifying as a “white evangelical” were able to answer “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.” Slightly more than 50 percent could pick Job out of a multiple choice as the figure “associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering.”¹⁵ In a 2016 study conducted by the American Bible Society, of those attending church at least once a month, participants fared better in identifying Genesis as the first book of the Bible (88 percent) but only 38 percent could correctly

¹³ G. Shane Morris, “Biblical Illiteracy Isn’t Funny,” *Troubler of Israel*(blog), April 9, 2018, accessed April 10, 2018, www.patheos.com/blogs/troublerofisrael/2018/04/biblical-illiteracy-isn-t-funny.

¹⁴ *Pew Forum on Religious Knowledge*. <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/u-s-religious-knowledge-survey/> Accessed July 9, 2018: 21.

¹⁵ *Pew Forum on Religious Knowledge*, 19.

identify that “the truth will set you free” as being in the Bible.¹⁶ It should not be a surprise that only 39 percent of churched people consider the Bible to be a worthy moral compass.¹⁷ The reality of our current culture is that preachers need to rethink exactly who might be listening to the sermons they prepare. “The non-Christians within homiletical earshot today are simply not the same as those within earshot fifty years ago. Few churches and preachers realize the radical degree to which our audience has changed.”¹⁸ In all professions, there is a great danger in believing that their listeners know more than what they do. When a doctor gives a diagnosis in terms the patient cannot understand, the patient is probably motivated enough to ask questions until they understand. When a preacher gives a message that listeners do not understand, they may be more inclined to quit listening. The need to give careful explanation and background to a biblical reference becomes all the more important when hoping to communicate with those with minimal spiritual background or interest.

American Culture Has Been Deeply Marked by Postmodernism

Sociologists have labeled various generations in our culture as Baby Boomers, Busters, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. However, there are challenges to using an age-based grid to understanding culture. One of those challenges is that each “generation” is lasting a shorter and shorter span of years due to the rate of change in our world. Some are calling Generation Z the last generation worthy of identification. The

¹⁶ Sarah Zylstra, “What the Latest Bible Research Reveals about Millennials,” *Christianity Today*, May 16, 2016, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/what-latest-bible-research-reveals-about-millennials.html>. Accessed February 8, 2019.

¹⁷ Barna Group, 124.

¹⁸ Chris Altmann, *Preaching to Pluralists* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 8.

speed of cultural change will make speaking of “generations” obsolete.¹⁹ Therefore, when trying to understand the changes in how people think, process information, and speak of matters of truth and authority, the language of modernity and postmodernism seems the most helpful.

A visual example of the shift from a modern perspective to a postmodern perspective was presented in the 1997 movie *Contact*. It tells the story of a scientist (played by Jodie Foster) who lived with a worldview that was marked by logic, science, and rationalism. Foster’s character then has an experience in outer space with intelligent life that was outside of her training and her understanding of the possible. Since her worldview no longer fits her experience, she is forced to shift from a scientific rationalism to an experiential and intuitive base of understanding. This message is one that is understood by our culture, one shifting from a world marked by certainty to a world marked by relativistic thinking and a lack of absolute truths.²⁰ This is a fitting description of the move from a modern world to a postmodern world.

Three Eras of Western Civilization

To understand the significance of postmodern thinking it is necessary to take a step back and describe the three eras of western culture.²¹ For each of these three eras, the focus of this project is on matters related to communication and how people learn and process information.

Premodern Era of All History Up to the Enlightenment (late 1600s)

¹⁹ Timothy Keller, *Preaching* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 13

²⁰ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 8.

²¹ Ronald J. Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnston, *Theology for Preaching. Authority, Truth, Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 15ff.

From the perspective of today it is rather difficult to grasp the realities of the world lived in by Abraham, Moses, or even the apostle Paul. Their world was one where transportation was primarily by foot, animal, or ship. Every written document available was one that had been painstakingly copied by hand and the majority of people were illiterate.

In the premodern world “tradition was the primary determiner of meaning.”²² There was little reason to explore or pursue meaning or change because in their thinking, the best way to do things had already been established. Matters of authority were determined by ancestors. Those who were old were considered to be wise, possessing the wisdom needed for life to continue in the best ways possible.

People lived with an active belief in a supernatural world. It was understood that there were angels and demons and spirits, and that such beings did at times intersect with humans in the physical realm. This heightened awareness of the spiritual world would naturally result in a heightened level of superstition.

People in the premodern world carried an identity that was first of all corporate. An individual was first of all a member of a nationality or a tribe. Individual rights, freedoms, and responsibilities were of secondary concern.²³

Finally, culture was communicated by oral and aural means in the premodern world. The traditions of each community was carried along by the means of telling stories, and storytellers were at a premium.

The Modern Era covering from the late 1600s to the mid-20th century.

²² Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 15.

²³ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 16.

The modern era was ushered in by scientific discoveries and a belief in the superiority of reason. Science held up the belief in the objective assessment of data and therefore the possibility of a comprehensive explanation of anything and everything. Empirical knowledge, the power of observation, and logic became the rules of the day. It is impossible to underestimate the changes modernity brought to the world.²⁴

The traditions of the past were no longer the welcome foundation of society, but were viewed as superstitions and primitive.²⁵ As a part of the modernity, “the Age of Enlightenment ushered in revolution against the power structures of the day. The ideas of the enlightenment undermined the authority of the monarchy and the Church and paved the way for the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries.”²⁶ Since science was the rule of the day, all matters of the supernatural were considered to be matters of myth and superstition. Since the concept of God could not be proven by scientific means, the underpinnings of all religion was called into question.

With the invention of the printing press, culture was now communicated through the printed word. The passing on of facts and figures became more important than the communication of story and meaning. The modern era with its advances in science and technology would have been impossible without the printing press and the precision that written communication provides over verbal communication.

²⁴ Armin Wenz, “Biblical Hermeneutics in a Postmodern World,” *Logia* 22, no. 3 (2013):15-24. ATLA accessed October 18, 2017.

²⁵ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 16.

²⁶ “Age of Enlightenment,” *Wikipedia*, accessed February 5, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment.

Modernity brought a new optimism to life. Through human progress, there was a new belief that the future not only could be better, but would be better. Science would be able to usher in a better world with more leisure time and less work, more health and less disease, more peace and less war.

Communal consciousness yielded to an emphasis on the individual in modernity. The American Revolution was in part a statement on the importance of the individual and the personal pursuit of happiness. The entire idea of free enterprise would be impossible without the notion of competition among individuals.²⁷

The modern world “fragmented knowledge into separated categories such as science, mathematics, psychology, philosophy, and religion. A culture of specialists came about.”²⁸ The results have been disastrous for religion. Religion has become only one brick of knowledge alongside others and seldom interacts with the other disciplines. To the church’s detriment, modernity’s influence pushed Christian faith out of the public arena into something that is private.²⁹

For good and for ill, modernity viewed the Bible with a critical eye. At its best, it is a book that should be dissected and examined hoping to learn new things. Sadly, as with “the dissection of a frog, the subject is not able to survive the process.”³⁰

When it comes to matters of authority, moderns trust science and reason. An unintended consequence was divorcing the mental process of knowing from the physical

²⁷ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 139.

²⁸ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 90.

²⁹ James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 49.

³⁰ Wesley Telyea, “A Postmodern Lutheran Hermeneutic for Preaching in the Twenty-First Century,” *Logia* 24, no. 3 (2015): 21-24.

response of doing. The gulf that currently exists between theology and theopraxy has been widened in modernity.

Modernity has been the dominant mindset of Western culture for over 200 years and has deeply impacted every pursuit of information, knowledge, and truth.

Postmodern Era Mid-20th Century Until Today

It is impossible to identify a specific time that ushered in the postmodern world. The shift has been going on since at least the early 20th century fueled by a growing sense that modernity is not working. The promises of modernity took several blows with two world wars and the reluctant realization that science could not usher in utopia. Some would argue that the final blow to the modern era came on November 22, 1963, with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. “Camelot was destroyed and the promise of a better world was dead.”³¹

In its essence, postmodernism refers to a worldview that is a backlash against the Enlightenment dream and dismisses any overarching set of ideas. “Postmodernity is the worldview that says no worldview exists.”³² Like “children finding out Santa Claus is not who they thought he was, humanity has become disillusioned by the promises of modernity.”³³

Postmodernity is the worldview that in many ways denies there is such a thing as a worldview. Postmodernity possesses little life of its own but feeds off the remains of modernity’s dying carcass.³⁴ Gone is the optimism and confident expectation that

³¹ Craig Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 50.

³² Johnston, 27.

³³ Loscalzo, 14.

³⁴ Johnston, 52.

everything will get better, and that disease and human failings will be overcome. In its place is a disillusionment with all that is modern and a growing belief that there is no framework for life that fits. Something is being replaced by nothing. There is a loss of certainty, and in its place there is a skepticism and cynicism about life, each other, and the future.³⁵ The darkness of Batman has replaced the perfection of Superman. It is not the age of the heroic, but of the ironic. In terms of finding meaning in life and an order that makes sense, postmodernity claims there is no deeper meaning.

Since the idea of progress is not embraced as it once was, there is a renewed interest in tradition and traditions for postmoderns. Old things are considered better than new with a renewed emphasis on things like old houses that have more character than new ones. In a similar way, small is better than big, with an interest in the neighborhood market and the wave of new microbreweries. In terms of fashion, home-made and unique are highly esteemed. In similar fashion, having your own garden and making your own jewelry are both considered as better than anything mass-produced.

Postmodernity carries a renewed interest in the spiritual realm. Everything from zombies to angels are viewed as more than objects of fairy tale and fantasy. In many ways, the postmodern person resembles the premodern more than the modern.

In another flashback to the premodern world, culture is no longer communicated in print as it was in modernity. The oral and aural once again rule the day. Storytellers again have value in that they communicate truth that is not only for the head but the heart.³⁶

³⁵ Johnston, 56.

³⁶ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 163.

The role of the individual is rather schizophrenic. On the one hand, the individual is the only determiner of truth. On the other hand, there is a deeper commitment to community than modernity ever valued. Ironically, the death of the individual is a hallmark of Postmodernity. People are not autonomous centers of reason and decision; they are shaped by their situation in time and space. In this regard, “context is the master and the individual merely responds.”³⁷ Community is more important than it once was. While people don’t lean into community because they “need it” to get work accomplished, there is a new value for the benefits of working on things together.

The postmodern holds respect for the natural world in its own right. The rebirth of concern for the earth is born both from the fear of ecocide and from a conviction that nature has its own integrity.³⁸ Again, this is closer to a premodern perspective, where people viewed themselves as in partnership with the earth. Moderns view the earth as something to be analyzed and categorized, but not necessarily appreciated.

When it comes to matter of authority, everything is relative. Everything is personal. For all that science has claimed to provide objective truths that can be counted on, each person has perceptions and experiences that cause each individual to reinterpret data in ways that are consistent with one’s own perceptions. “To be postmodern is to be post-certain.”³⁹

In modernity, the religious question was “Is there a God?” Now, James Emery White has noticed that the new response is, “What I know about the God of the Bible, I

³⁷Karen Petersen Finch, “Calvin for Postmoderns: Humility as Method and Message,” *Pro ecclesia* 23, no. 4 (September 2014): 400-417.

³⁸Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 22.

³⁹ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 28.

don't like.” The implication is that God acts in morally inferior ways compared to the rest of us.⁴⁰ The postmodern individual holds court on the morality of God. A view of God holding court on the morality of a person is considered rather offensive.

There are substantive differences between the way the postmodern mind processes information and the way the modern mind does. Graham Johnston made the following summary comparison: “So where modernity was cocky, postmodernity is anxious. Where modernity had all the answers, postmodernity is full of questions; where modernity clung to certainty and truth, postmodernity views the world as relative and subjective.”⁴¹

It is a different world for those who listen to sermons than was the case a generation ago. Preachers who don't understand this reality will find ourselves answering questions that no one is asking. “If biblical communicators fail to perceive the significant ideological shifts affecting humanity, the church may wake up to discover that preachers are merely talking to themselves about matters only the deeply committed comprehend.”⁴²

Moderns, Postmoderns, and the Bible

Evangelical preachers have consistently come to the Bible as their source of authority for the construction and delivery of a sermon. The ability to be able to proclaim “thus saith the Lord” has been their anchor for truth and their confidence when delivering a message that might run against the current thoughts of humankind. However, the views of those who are receiving the message may or may not grant the same authority to the

⁴⁰ James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 132.

⁴¹ Johnston, 26.

⁴² Johnston, 9.

Bible. Both the modern and the postmodern may dispute the authority of Scripture, but they may do so for very different reasons that need to be addressed with a very different reasoning.

In the mindset of the modern world, the first question asked is “Is the Bible true?” In response to these and other arguments, the evangelical reaction was to develop various argumentative apologetics based on science, logic, and rational thought. While it might be impossible to completely prove the Bible as true through the tools of modernity, there was certainly “evidence that demands a verdict.”⁴³ In the postmodern world, the new fundamental question is “Is the Bible true to me?” There is no reason to even ask if the Bible is accurate in historical detail because it really doesn’t matter. This shift is so significant that some like Myron Bradley Penner have concluded that “the modern apologetic enterprise so many Christians engage in a bankrupt venture.”⁴⁴ Instead of focusing on issues of historical congruence, the postmodern is more attracted to the Bible as being personally interesting, experientially enriching, and a place where one can learn about Jesus.

This contrasting view of the Bible is what landed Andy Stanley in the midst of controversy. Stanley, while holding a personal view of the Bible that would be acceptable to most evangelicals, has been under attack for stating that believing in that the historicity of Noah and Jonah are not essential to your salvation but believing in the resurrection is.⁴⁵ Rather than having a conversation get bogged down in some issue coming out of the Old

⁴³ Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson 1979).

⁴⁴ Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing, 2013), 12.

⁴⁵ Rebecca Lowry and Lindy Lowry, “7 Startling Facts: An Up-Close Look At Church Attendance in America,” *Church Leaders*, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>.

Testament, Stanley would rather have people focus on the eyewitness accounts of Luke and the other gospel writers. However, this does lead to a challenging question to ponder: How much of the Bible can be myth before it is all myth? Is it okay to view Adam and Eve as representative instead of actual? Is it okay to view the account of Jonah only as good story? Do we lose something when we consider the account of Job as good literature but not literal? How about the miracles of Jesus and the virgin birth? When have we lost too much? Where is the right line to draw? In a postmodern world, the line is wherever you want to put it.

In a modern world, the action toward the Bible was to analyze it. The perspective of moderns is what birthed textual and historical criticism. Even those with a perspective that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God, the tendency was to break the text down to its individual pieces as opposed to seeing the text as a whole. It was modern thinking that took the poetry of the Bible and felt it necessary to catalogue the type of meter and to debate the meaning of each and every word in the context of each and every stanza. Furthermore, modernity supports a belief that if one studies enough, a definitive answer can be found on every theological issue. Moderns believe that the more information that can be attained, the more clarity that will be gained.

In the postmodern world, there is less reason to analyze the text and a greater desire to appreciate the text. Furthermore, the postmodern believes firmly that we cannot help but interpret the Bible from a perspective that is tainted by our experiences and prior beliefs. A telling example of the importance of personal perspective is revealed in the following: Christians from three nations (United States, Russia, and Tanzania) were told the story of the prodigal son and asked about it. The question was, "Why did the prodigal

son end up in the pigsty?” The majority view of the Americans was that he ended up in the pigsty because he squandered his money. The majority view of the Russians was that it was because of the famine. The majority view of Tanzanians was that it was because no one helped him. So, which is true? Perspective changes things.⁴⁶

While moderns are more interested in the details of the Bible, postmoderns are more interested in the storyline of the Bible. In 2014, Adam Lewis Green developed a plan to publish a Bible without all of the chapter and verse divisions. He launched a *Kickstarter* campaign, hoping to raise \$37,000 to start the process. Much to his surprise, the campaign raised a *Kickstarter* record of \$1.4 million.⁴⁷ One cannot help but wonder if Green tapped into a desire to analyze the Bible less and appreciate it as a story.

A modern world has a bent toward propositional truth. As such, there is a need to speak of the truth-claims of Christianity. The job of the preacher is to carefully define these truth-claims and to passionately define these same truths. Then the listener is free to either accept or reject these truths with eternity hanging in the balance. These truths cannot be “kind of” truth, but either are truth or are false. The postmodern mind may well rebel against such a black-and-white world where a person is expected to give mental assent to a list of statements. They are much more comfortable dealing with ambiguity.

For the modern Christian, the God of the Bible is a God of order and logic. God’s creation is understood as being well-defined and orderly. The same would be true in relationships such as male and female, which need to be quantified with an order, rank, and pattern that all couples should follow. Moderns like to stress that humans rank higher

⁴⁶ Osaba O. Otaigbe, *Building Cultural Intelligence in Church and Ministry* (London, UK: Authorhouse 2016).

⁴⁷ “Bibliotheca,” *Wikipedia*, last edited July 26, 2018, accessed November 19, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliotheca_\(Bible\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliotheca_(Bible)).

than creation and it is to serve us. Moderns appreciate systematic theology, where all things fit and make sense. When it comes to the elements of a worship service, the modern's guiding verse is that everything should be done "in a fitting and proper way" (I Cor. 14:40). For the postmodern, the God of the Bible is one who was not afraid to get down in the mud to create humankind. Creation is something beautiful, something that causes us to praise God for his creativity, not his orderliness. Because God has created something so beautiful, the earth is something to be cared for, not exploited, and our theology needs to allow room for mystery.

The desired effect of these examples is to illustrate that there is a significant shift in the concerns of the modern and the postmodern listener. It is not that one approach is decidedly better but that they are decidedly different. A preacher who desires to gain a hearing for his/her message would be wise to speak in the language of the audience he/she most desires to communicate with.

Communication and the Postmodern Mind

The means of communication continues to change at breakneck speed. One hundred years ago, the only option for recording music was the scratchy recordings of the metal cylinders of Edison's phonograph or the flat disks of a gramophone. Since that time, vinyl recordings improved, the reel-to-reel tape recorder appeared, the 8-track, the cassette, and the compact disc have appeared on the scene, each with better quality and greater convenience for the listener. Now, with the advent of digital technology, there are those in their twenties who have all their music in digital form and own no music in "physical" form.

Just as the recent changes in technology have changed the means of our listening, there is reason to believe that the way a person receives information and processes it changes as well. However, instead of focusing only on the digital revolution, it is necessary to take a step back and take a deeper look at the way communication has changed for the generations.

Oral Communication

The premodern world was primarily a world of oral communication. While there is some debate about the actual literacy rates of world 2000 years ago, the debate is about whether it was as low as ten percent or something closer to 50 percent of the population.⁴⁸ Either way, verbal communication was the standard form of communication. While written works were in existence, any copies of such books were only available through painstakingly copying the text by hand. When things were written down, a person was able to read the message; it was assumed that the message would be read aloud.⁴⁹ Reading was a public activity, not private. As such, the written word in practice became the spoken word.

Modern World – Written Communication

Of all the inventions of the modern era, perhaps the most important was the invention of the printing press. Arriving on the scene in the late fifteenth century, the printing press made mass communication possible. Since there was more reason to read, literacy rates began to increase as well.

⁴⁸ Brian J. Wright, “Ancient Literacy in New Testament Research: Incorporating a few more lines of Enquiry,” *TRINJ* 36NS (2015): 161-89.

⁴⁹ Thu-Huong Ha, “The Beginning of Silent Reading,” accessed August 28, 2018, <https://qz.com/quartzzy/118580/the-beginning-of-silent-reading>.

Turning into a culture that became dependent on written communication rather than oral communication had a profound impact on the way the brain functions. For example, in the oral tradition in which Jesus communicated, he spoke in a series of parables on the kingdom of God being like a seed and a field and a pearl (Matt. 13). In a culture based on oral communication, each of these stories stood on their own and there was little need to harmonize these parables or to organize these parts into a common whole. However, when those parables are brought into a modern world and the printed word, the brain of the reader leans into its systematic instincts, organizing the statements of Jesus in a more linear way.⁵⁰ For two centuries the best of biblical scholarship taught that the way to communicate the truths of God was through “linear thinking by reason and logic.”⁵¹

Richard Jensen described the changes written communication brought to preaching in his “Gutenberg homiletic”:

The goal of preaching is to teach the lessons of text.
 In order to teach the lessons or meaning of the text, the points to be made are usually abstracted from the text.
 The sermon is aimed primarily at the hearer’s mind.
 The sermon is developed in a logical, sequential, and linear manner.
 The sermon is prepared under the criteria for written material.
 The faith engendered in the hearer is “faith” that the ideas are true.⁵²

The homiletic practices of today are dependent on the printing press and are based on the principles of written communication. An ongoing challenge of preaching is to take the written word and communicate it as the spoken word.

⁵⁰ Richard Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing, 1993), 23.

⁵¹ John McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 73-74.

⁵² Jensen, 7.

Postmodern Communication is Oral and Aural

The year 1985 is important when it comes to communication patterns in America. It was the first year where there were more videocassettes rented from video stores than there were books checked out of libraries.⁵³ In one of the latest studies done, Americans aged 20-24 spend less than seven minutes a day reading.⁵⁴ The same age group watch more than three hours of material on TV or other electronic devices. This does not include the additional 90 minutes listening to music.⁵⁵ This data is evidence to a growing shift in our culture away from being a text-based culture to a culture that is more driven by oral communication.

There is a marked difference between the way a person “hears” in an oral culture and a literate culture. Richard Jensen has summarized the differences in the following side-by-side comparison:

Oral Culture	Literate Culture
1. Stitching stories together	1. Linear development of ideas
2. Use of repetition.	2. Structure ideas in space
3. Situational vs. abstraction	3. Propositions as main points
4. A tone of conflict	4. Analytical in nature.
5. Right brain communication	5. Left brain communication
6. Metaphors of participation	6. Metaphors of illustration
7. Thinking in story	7. Thinking in ideas ⁵⁶

Herein lies a problem: Preachers have been trained to use modern forms of communication to address modern audiences who have modern resistances to the gospel.

⁵³ Jensen, 49.

⁵⁴ “Reading Habits in the United States,” *Statista*, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/topics/3928/reading-habits-in-the-us/>.

⁵⁵ “Weekly Time Spent with Media,” *Statista*, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/458997/weekly-time-spent-media-usa-by-age/>.

⁵⁶ Jensen, 43.

However, postmoderns have different concerns about Christianity and those concerns need to be addressed in different ways. As Jensen concludes, “The very locus of believing has changed. With the advent of the world of print we come to a world where seeing is believing. That is far removed from the oral world where hearing is believing.”⁵⁷ Simply, the non-Christians within homiletical earshot today are simply not the same as those within earshot fifty years ago. Few preachers realize the radical degree to which our audience has changed.⁵⁸ The listener of today certainly lives on the borderland of both the written world and the oral world. The preacher of today needs to as well.

Communicating to Our Post-Christian, Postmodern World

When addressing the task of communicating to American culture, preachers need to adopt the practices of missionaries. Preachers need to study the culture of the world in which they minister and look for ways to make inroads into the foreign soil on which they stand. For whatever reason, American preachers have seemed unwilling or unable to contextualize the gospel to best address the culture.⁵⁹ Sermons can have great depth and meaning and still be presented in a way that a postmodern listener will consider.

Postmodern Topics

It would be tempting to view the new philosophical dynamics of the world and conclude that the gospel has a diminished foothold. However, there is reason to be optimistic that “within the postmodern whirlwind there lies, waiting to be reaped, an

⁵⁷ Jensen, 33.

⁵⁸ Altrock, 8.

⁵⁹ Altrock, 45.

unprecedented opportunity to clarify the nature and import of our theology and preaching.”⁶⁰

The Postmodern World Understands That Humanity’s Optimism is Baseless.

The modern era was founded upon an optimism that “by the enlightened application of reason humanity might eradicate disease and suffering, establish a basis for just and moral behavior, foster personal and social liberation, and subdue nature for the good of all people.”⁶¹ As Graham Johnston wrote, “Postmodernism has stuck a needle in the ballooned arrogance of the Enlightenment.”⁶² While the world is becoming more and more technologically advanced, the postmodern mindset is less likely to be seduced by technology’s promises.⁶³

Sadly, this doesn’t necessarily mean the postmodern is actively seeking for some better answers in life. Instead, the postmodern mind has lost hope in any kind of better world. What is left is little more than the mantra of “Eat, drink and be merry.” A certain pessimism is common and while the Star Wars saga ended with a new and better world for the victors, where good triumphed over evil, the Hunger Games trilogy ended with devastation, where the victors inherited a world that was bleak, filled with despair, and having universally corrupt institutional leadership.

The Postmodern Mind Is Much More Open to Conversations about Faith

⁶⁰ David Lohse, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 3.

⁶¹ Lohse, 1.

⁶² Johnston, 16.

⁶³ Loscalzo, 15.

The modern world was tough on faith in general. The Enlightenment sought to “relegate matters of faith to the rear of the bus as either insignificant or nonexistent.”⁶⁴ As such, the church was fighting upstream against the current of faith being considered totally foolish. The rage in the 70s and 80s was a confrontational apologetic, focused on rationale and intellectual integrity.⁶⁵ In this regard, postmodernism brings a new openness to discuss matters of faith and spirituality. “As postmodern scholars demonstrate that scientific and anthropological foundations are philosophically unattainable, faith—a category ridiculed by the culture of the Enlightenment—becomes viable once again.”⁶⁶

However, for postmodern people, there is a huge gulf between speaking of matters of faith and matters of truth. In modernity, the issue in cultivating a faith was credibility. In postmodernity, the key issue of faith is desirability. A person believes something not because they know it is true, but because they wish it were true.⁶⁷ To the postmodern mind, spirituality is not the same as religion. Religion speaks of rigidity, structure, and institutionalism whereas spirituality is about personal growth and wholeness.⁶⁸

Postmodern Minds Are Open to Conversations That Involve the Supernatural

The modern mind had little time for any talk of a world beyond the tangible. As such, while premoderns divided the world between the natural and the supernatural, the Modern mind divided the world between the natural and that which was mere

⁶⁴ Johnston, 31.

⁶⁵ Johnston, 14.

⁶⁶ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 31.

⁶⁷ Johnston, 44.

⁶⁸ Johnston, 162.

superstition. Biblical accounts of demon possession and angelic beings had no merit in the modern mind, and, as such, the accounts of the supernatural made the entire Bible suspect and caused it to be considered myth. The miraculous was impossible because all matters needed to be verified and reproducible. It is “difficult to underestimate the nature of the change that occurred as the early modernists sought to erect a society guided, not by superstitious belief, but by a universally valid rationality.”⁶⁹ The postmodern view of the world changes everything. Even those with no religious perspective are open to the idea of angels and evil spirits and the unexplainable. The hurdle of things supernatural that was a stumbling block for the modern mind is more easily crossed.

On the downside, while postmodern individuals are open to the supernatural, they proceed with no discrimination. Whether it is Mother Earth or having a spirit guide or even relating to a spirit animal, it is difficult to declare that any spirit is better or worse than any other. With “the loss of truth, people will now seek faith without boundaries, categories, or definitions. The old parameters of belief do not exist. As a result, people will be increasingly open to knowing God, but on their own terms.”⁷⁰

The Postmodern Mind Is Much More Open to the Value of Community

One of the casualties of modernity was a weakened sense of community. In modernity, the stress is that all humans are autonomous, thinking, self-determining individuals. The result of modern thinking was the rise of individualism and a greater sense of personal independence. The question could be asked: how does a person who lives in a country that values independence as America does, with a theology that values

⁶⁹ Lohse, 9.

⁷⁰ Johnston, 31.

independence like Evangelicalism does, hope to find community and interdependence in a local church that also values being independent?

Postmodernism has issued a call for the resurgence of community. There are whispers of recapturing a communal spirit and the interdependency that the mechanical revolution so deeply corroded is making a comeback. “A recapturing of the communal spirit may be on the horizon.”⁷¹

If there is a challenge on the issue of community it is this: the very thing postmoderns claim they crave is forever out of their reach due to their commitment to personal fulfillment and their inherent distrust.⁷² It is “ironic that the mindset that desires community becomes so suspicious that building community becomes virtually impossible.”⁷³

A Casualty of Modernity Has Been a Disconnect Between Believing and Doing

For moderns, cognitive function mattered more than practical application. It would be naïve to claim this dichotomy is a product of modernity. The Apostle James addressed the issue long ago (James 2:20). However, as Wesley Telyea has pointed out, “Postmodernism has done us a favor by calling us back to a more holistic understanding of what it means to know something...it has pushed us to reconsider just what is involved in the act of knowing, and, as a result, drives us to see who our listeners are in a different—and I contend—more biblical light than modernity ever allowed.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Loscalzo, 19.

⁷² Johnston, 121.

⁷³ Loscalzo, 19.

⁷⁴ Telyea, 22.

While having a well-integrated faith is a good thing, the downside in the postmodern world is that there isn't much that fits into a biblical faith. While modernity attempted to lay bare the eternal essence of the universe, postmodernity declares that there is no essence; and whereas modernity promised to reveal the truth, postmodernity denies its existence.⁷⁵ In this regard, while modernity did not seem to believe that belief required action, postmodernity would claim there is no belief to act upon.

Postmodernism has merely given us a new set of challenges to address than modern thinking. As John Hannah has questioned,

Could it be ... that the evangelical emphasis on 'getting theology right' and with its reduction of the immensely difficult and complex into quick and easy steps seems to have considerably affected our view of the gospel and its sufficiency? The stress on rationality and provability of the evangelical faith has seemingly robbed us of much of the inner dynamic of mystery and wonder, of reverential awe, and of our own littleness. In a quest to make the modern church more important in society, the church is finding itself less appealing.⁷⁶

The Approach of the Preacher

Ronald Allen has identified six key issues for preaching a postmodern ethos.⁷⁷

Authority

Preachers have a diminished amount of authority in the present culture. Whether we want to argue whether this should be, it is. In addition, the more one attempts to claim a position of authority, the more the preacher will be resisted. The preacher cannot simply

⁷⁵ Lohse, 27.

⁷⁶ Johnston, 147.

⁷⁷ Ronald Allen, "As the Worldviews Turn: Six Key Issues for Preaching in a Postmodern ethos," *Encounter* 57, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 28-34.

“invoke an exterior source as sufficient basis for the congregant’s assent.”⁷⁸ Instead of fighting this reality, the preacher needs to anticipate the kinds of push-back questions a thinking person might have. Include statements such as, “About now you might be asking how this works in real life?” The preacher gains credibility by being willing to admit there are points of resistant as he/she accepts those with a questioning posture.

Truth

In modernity, truth was based on empirical observations and rational deduction. The modern preacher could establish credibility for the message by pointing to places of correspondence between Christian doctrine and the scientific world view.⁷⁹ For the postmodern, truth is not something that is learned as much as it is something that is discovered. Therefore, the preacher can gain credibility as serving more as a guide in a mutual quest for truth and less of an authority for what truth is. There is wisdom in speaking as one who has not yet arrived at a place of knowing all things but as someone on a journey towards truth. Steve Brown stated, “I’ve learned that if I’m going to communicate with the modern world, I’m going to have to be as much a fellow struggler as herald of God’s Word.”⁸⁰ Christian communicators must be able to show that they remember what it is like to doubt.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Allen, 28.

⁷⁹ Allen, 30.

⁸⁰ Steve Brown, Haddon Robinson and William Willimon, *A Voice in the Wilderness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1993), 41.

⁸¹ Keller, 110.

There is also wisdom in preaching with a more inductive style. A deductive style begins with a proclamation of truth and gives supporting arguments for that truth. An inductive style invites the listener into seeing the process by which the preacher has arrived at his/her conclusion. It is the equivalent of “showing your work” in high school math classes.⁸² Postmoderns are more willing to be led than to be told.

To the complicated questions of life, never bring simplistic answers or trite clichés. “Preaching that seems to claim that the preacher is never plagued by questions will prove unhelpful to those who are, and it will give false comfort to those who insulate themselves from reflecting on such questions.”⁸³

Knowledge

The impression given in modernity was that the mastery of factual data is what made a person wise. Postmoderns believe that human understanding is a full fabric interweaving feelings, intuition, hard data, and the capacity to reason.⁸⁴ D. A. Carson says, “The irony is delicious. The modernity which has arrogantly insisted that human reason is the final arbiter of truth has spawned a stepchild that has arisen to slay it.”⁸⁵

When speaking to postmoderns one needs to remember that knowledge is gained both through their theoretical learnings and their experiences in life. These experiences carry more weight in faith decisions than “brilliant logical arguments based upon reason and analysis.”⁸⁶ For those who went through the rigors of gaining theological degrees,

⁸² Johnston, 75.

⁸³ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 182.

⁸⁴ Allen, 31.

⁸⁵ D. A. Carson. *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 100.

⁸⁶ Altrock, 34.

“many ended up with the misguided concept—an outgrowth of the Enlightenment—that gaining information will placate some unrelenting inner craving in our lives.”⁸⁷ If we are going to be able to connect with a postmodern world, we will need to purposely engage the place where our minds meet our emotions.

God and God’s Relationship with the World

The postmodern preacher must always remember that the goal is to have a fresh encounter with God. Chris Altmann gives a helpful definition that “bibliocentric preaching focuses on what the text means and anthropocentric preaching focuses on what the text is telling me to do.”⁸⁸ The preferred goal should be an approach that is theocentric, helping the listener encounter the God who is real and is at work in the world. Postmoderns are attracted to a God who is bigger than the sum total of information about God. The idea of “awe” resonates with postmoderns, a God that is beyond description and who moves in mysterious ways. The modern world leaned toward a God who was like the divine clockmaker, who perhaps started the world but then stepped away from it all. The postmodern believes that if there is a God, he is certainly alive and well.

Individual and Community

In the premodern world, the listener of a sermon understood that they were first of all a member of a community. The notion that it “takes a village to raise a child” was fully a premodern understanding. In the modern era, there was a new emphasis on the

⁸⁷ Loscalzo, 31.

⁸⁸ Altmann, 63.

importance of the individual and the goal for a person was to find oneself. For the postmodern, they have a belief that both realities are important. As a listener to a sermon, a postmodern wants to hear a message aimed at the community that they can individually choose to accept.

James Emery White has articulated the new order of involvement he has witnessed, elevating the importance of community.⁸⁹ From 1950 to 1980 the order was to first see an unchurched person come to Christ, then be incorporated in the church community, then finally find some sort of involvement, usually within the church. From 1980 to 2000 there was a shift in the order. It was understood that the unchurched would often first be drawn to a sense of community, then in that context be drawn to Christ. Finally, the person would find a cause, often within the church. From 2000 until today another shift has taken place. The unchurched will often identify a cause to invest in first, and often this cause is not within the walls of the church. Whether it is to be involved in caring for the homeless or matters of social justice for the marginalized, the postmoderns want to find something meaningful to do with their lives. The next step in their journey is to find a sense of community with others within the cause and then, as the last step in the process, someone introduces them to Christ. In this way, the individual has found a place in community and then moved toward a personal faith.

New Modes of Discourse

The modern church conceived of a sermon as “the exposition of a proposition.”⁹⁰ If the preacher was using a narrative text, his/her goal was to strip away all the window

⁸⁹ White, 100.

⁹⁰ Allen, 34.

stripping away the details of the story and get to the kernel of truth at the core of the story. When looking at a story like that of Daniel in the lion's den (Dan. 6), the goal was to remove all of the details of the story that might distract the listener from the key truths that needed to be recognized. The postmodern has a different understanding of how truth is discovered. As such, the postmodern desires to hear the story for the sake of the story.

Theology in the Western world in many ways has tended to overlook and marginalize the narrative nature of Scripture.⁹¹ It begins with the equivalent of "once upon a time" and ends with "they all lived happily ever after." There are certainly some texts that lend themselves to propositional declaration. However, in a postmodern climate that is less receptive to propositional assertions, perhaps preachers should consider "preparing a way in the wilderness" by beginning with the biblical narrative.⁹²

In conclusion, there are certainly times when the preacher will need to stand in a position where he/she needs to speak against the culture of the day. However, more often than not the preacher will need to look for ways to speak to the culture. To be able to do so will require diligence in studying who it is that the message is targeted for.

⁹¹ Ray Lubeck, "Talking Story: Narrative Thought, Worldviews and Postmodernism." presented at the 50th National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, Orlando, Florida, (November 19-21, 1998). Accessed TREN, November 11, 2018, 5.

⁹² Lubeck, 10.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH METHODS

Review of the Project

The purpose of this thesis project was to gain a clearer understanding of the cultural distinctives of today's listeners, including their level of biblical knowledge. In light of current cultural distinctives, the goal of this project was to identify principles to guide the preacher in addressing the changing terrain of twenty-first century listeners. The researcher has chosen a qualitative approach to this project and the case study method of investigation.

The research was focused on Constance Evangelical Free Church, located in Andover, Minnesota. The researcher is one of the teaching pastors on the staff and has an ongoing desire to be able to connect well with those in attendance. Constance staff has a desire to communicate well with everyone who attends and a focused interest in communicating well with those who are new to their faith journey. To communicate well, one needs to learn more about the biblical knowledge level of the average person and to investigate how thinking patterns and beliefs might be changing in our culture. To gain this insight the researcher followed three streams of data. The first was to conduct a survey on biblical knowledge at the fall community festival hosted by Constance. The survey administered used the same questions asked in a Pew Research Survey conducted in 2010.¹ The second stream of data came from an online interview conducted with recent

¹ Pew U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey.

visitors to gain their perspectives on effective communication. Finally, three local preachers were interviewed.

Research and Methodology

Qualitative Research

The research of this project was qualitative and used the case study method. The qualitative approach is the recommended approach when “we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue.”² A project such as this that investigates communicating biblical truth to those who have a myriad of levels of biblical knowledge is complex. In that complexity, a research approach was needed that claims that knowledge can be gained from learning about the subjective experiences of people.³ This approach allowed for maximum participation from individuals related to Constance without being overly intrusive.

A qualitative approach also allowed the flexibility needed to be able to proceed “without the restrictions of formal academic structures of writing.”⁴ A limiting concern throughout this research was gathering useful data from those who are least committed to attending Constance. Working with adults, there was an awareness that there was potentially a certain degree of embarrassment for those who do not have as much biblical knowledge as they think they should. Flexibility was needed in the gathering of data.

A desired outcome from this study is for the teaching pastors of Constance Free Church to be more aware of the audience to whom they are speaking. To gain this

² John Creswell and Cheryl Poth, *Quality Inquiry and Research Design* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 45.

³ Creswell and Poth, 21.

⁴ Creswell and Poth, 45.

knowledge, it was necessary to gather information that reports the perspectives of individual people. A qualitative method of inquiry was deemed to be the best method to use.

Case Study

The researcher took a case study approach to this project. His data was collected primarily through a survey and an online interview. Nancy Jean Vyhmeister describes the case study approach as something that “helps a pastor learn from a situation, usually one in which they are involved. It is a tool to enhance awareness of the individuals involved, of the situation, of the message of Scripture, and of the pastor’s own religious tradition.”⁵ Other streams of information used included national survey data, extensive written material, and the researcher’s own experience and observation. A real challenge for this case study was that the best data would be available from those least committed to Constance. The researcher believed the best solution was to gather information in a way to preserve anonymity and was minimally invasive.

Festival Survey

The first primary source of data was a written survey conducted at a fall festival held at Constance Free Church. The survey contained a section on demographic information and a section on the respondent’s level of biblical knowledge. The multiple-choice questions related to demographics: “Where do you live?” “What age group are you in?” “How often did you attend church in the last year?”

⁵ Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Paper*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 55.

The section on biblical knowledge included seven questions. These questions were exactly the same questions as those used in a 2010 Pew Research study.⁶ The decision was made to use part of the Pew survey instrument for sake of clarity and for the ability to compare the local findings to a national study. Those seven questions were:

1. What is the first book of the Bible?
2. What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
3. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?
 - Nazareth
 - Bethlehem
 - Jerusalem
 - Jericho
4. Which is NOT in the Ten Commandments?
 - Do unto others as you would have them do to you.
 - Don't steal
 - Don't commit adultery.
 - Remember to keep the Sabbath.
5. Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering?
 - Elijah
 - Job
 - Moses
 - Abraham
6. Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt?
 - Abraham
 - Elijah
 - Moses
 - Job
7. Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God?
 - Abraham
 - Job
 - Moses
 - Elijah

Online Interview

The second primary source of data was gathered from individuals who visited Constance Free Church over the previous five months. It is appropriate to call this an on-

⁶ Pew, 19. Other aspects of religious knowledge were covered in the study. Only the questions relating to biblical knowledge were used in this research.

line interview, an option affirmed by Creswell.⁷ Qualitative data collection on a web-based platform had some distinct advantages for this project. Respondents were allowed to participate while able to remain anonymous and being allowed time to reflect and respond on their timetable.⁸

The interview consisted of seven questions designed to gather the perspectives and reflections of the respondents related to listening to sermons. The seven questions were as follows: “Approximately how many Sundays did you attend a church (any church) in the last year?” “What is your age group?” “What topics do you think would be good to address in a sermon?” “Do you ever come away from a sermon confused? If so, what typically causes the confusion?” “When a pastor preaches, what helps you understand the sermon?” “Is it important to you that the sermon is based on what the Bible says? Why?” “What has contributed the most to your current level of biblical knowledge?”

The first two questions were used to give a demographic foundation by which to filter the remaining answers. These two questions from the online interview were identical to questions asked on the Palooza survey, allowing comparison and contrast. It was decided to begin with these demographic questions to allow the participant to feel like they were making good progress on the questionnaire.

The third question asked about various topics the respondents thought would be good to address in a sermon. While the responses to this question provided some interesting data, the main purpose of the question was to assist the respondent in

⁷ Creswell and Poth, 162.

⁸ Creswell and Poth, 160.

transitioning into the heart of the interview, to realize they were now being asked questions that would take more thought and reflection.

The fourth and fifth questions were placed in this position because the researcher viewed these as the most important questions. The researcher believed that, given the general lack of biblical knowledge, there would logically be moments when the preacher would assume members of the congregation knew more than they actually do. It was extremely important to know if those who visit Constance find the sermon clear or confusing. The respondent was then asked to identify things the preacher could do to be better understood.

The last two questions were designed as open-ended questions related to the respondents' views of the Bible and their level of biblical knowledge. The researcher wanted to know how much the respondents valued a sermon being based on the Bible. In a related topic, the researcher desired to know where the respondents had gained their level of biblical knowledge and if there would be any correlation between church attendance, the foundations of their biblical knowledge, and their level of understanding the sermons preached at Constance.

The primary interest of this case study is not the regular attender of Constance Free Church, but the person who might visit from a practice of marginal church attendance. The assumption of the researcher is that if the preacher assumes the listeners knows more than they know, the listeners will be discouraged and not return. Furthermore, the concern is that if the preaching lacks clarity, those who do regularly attend will not invite any one to church unless that invitee comes from a church background with a certain degree of knowledge related to the Bible and its message.

Coding

All surveys gathered at the fall festival were entered into an Excel spreadsheet by a research assistant. This allowed the answers to be analyzed from various combinations of information. Using the exact questions that were used in the Pew research allowed further comparisons and analysis compared to this national study. No coding was needed in the analysis of the festival survey.

The data from the online interviews was gathered through Survey Monkey⁹ and analyzed by the researcher. There was a need to create specific categories for the responses of three of the questions: “What topics would be good to address in a sermon?”, “Do you ever come away from a sermon confused?”, and “When a pastor preaches, what helps you understand the sermon?” The responses were coded into appropriate categories that would assist in developing principles for preaching with clarity.

Participants and Data Collection

Festival Survey

On September 16, 2018, a free festival was held at Constance Free Church. There were an estimated 3,000 in attendance from the surrounding area. This festival is intended as a gift to the surrounding community with free food, games, and inflatable play houses. Throughout the six-hour event, it was announced over the public address that there was a “raffle” event going on where a ticket could be obtained by completing a survey. Every hour a drawing was held with prizes being for family events such as tickets to the zoo, to a children’s museum, or to a professional baseball game. Throughout the

⁹ Surveymonkey.com.

day 448 surveys were completed. People were informed that they could only enter once throughout the day. A copy of this survey is in Appendix A.

The online interview was sent to all email addresses gathered over the previous five months. The interview questions were sent to 84 with 21 responses received. There was no way to determine which of those 84 were guests visiting family, transfers from other churches, or people new to their faith journey. There were undoubtedly others who attended but did not fill out anything that would reveal they had attended. A logical assumption would be that those most familiar with church culture would be most likely to fill out a guest card. Regardless, it was determined this was the least-biased way to gather information.

John Latham gave a helpful description of how many participants are enough for a qualitative study.¹⁰ The key is to reach the point of “saturation,” where additional responses are repeating the kinds of responses already received. In his experience, the number of respondents is eleven. However, the researcher needs to go beyond the point of saturation to ensure new kinds of responses are not being revealed.

In addition to the survey and the online interviews, the researcher also interviewed three area preachers. Each of these have a reputation for communicating well with a ministry that seems to be successful in reaching across generations and with people who are early in their faith journey. The interviews focused on communicating well and what adjustments or concessions they have made in their preaching to address our current culture.

¹⁰ John Latham, “Qualitative Sample Size-How Many Participants Is Enough?” Accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.drjohnlatham.com/many-participants-enough/>.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH ON WHAT PEOPLE KNOW

Festival Survey

The Research Process

The first stream of data was collected on September 16, 2018, at a community event called “The Family Palooza.” Approximately 3,000 people attended this event.

A survey was developed for this event. The survey would hold a dual purpose for Constance. First of all, Constance was wondering if the Family Palooza was actually reaching the intended audience, or whether churched people were merely inviting their friends and family who attend other churches. If this was true, the church would consider cancelling the event, concluding it was not worth the effort or money. The researcher worked closely with the chief operations manager for this event to shape the questions to gather the desired information. The second use of the survey was for the researcher to gather information related to this project, determining the level of biblical knowledge of those attending. The questions for this section of the survey were identical to those used by the Pew research team on a survey conducted in 2010.

To facilitate filling out the surveys, tables were set up under a tent canopy. The space for the survey was shared with the sound control booth for the day. The survey was incentivized with tickets to family-friendly venues such as the zoo, a children’s museum, and a professional baseball game. Approximately every 15 minutes an announcement was made over the sound system, inviting people to fill out a survey. When a person completed a survey, they were given a ticket that was entered into a raffle, with a drawing

held once every hour. The survey area was hosted by the researcher and two volunteers. There were 448 surveys gathered during the six-hour event. All surveys were then entered into Excel for analysis.

Survey Response Overview

The first piece of pertinent information from the survey was how people described their church attendance. Following is the actual question and the appropriate percentages related to the responses given.

Table 1: Church Attendance (n=488).

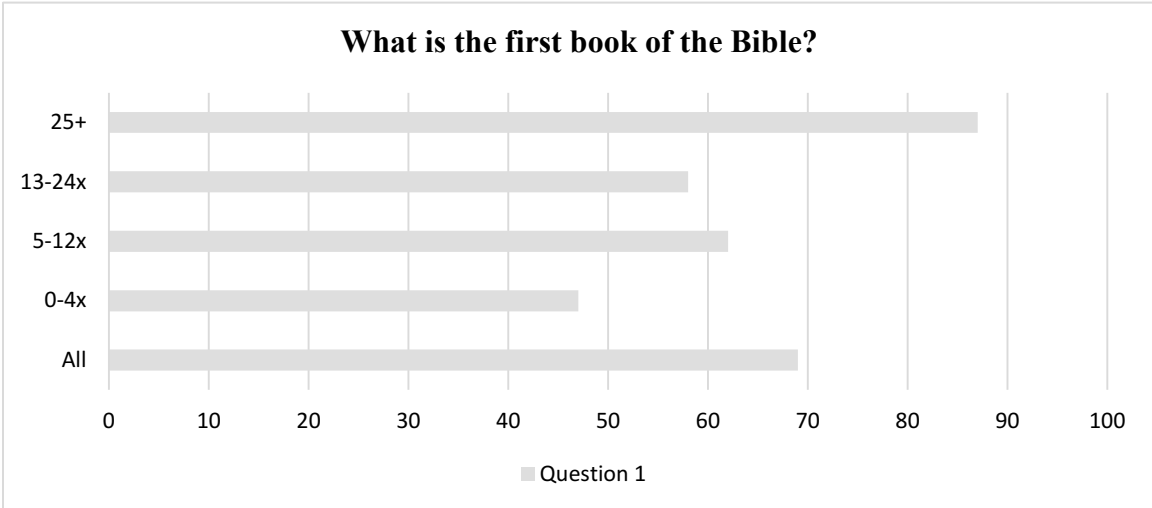
Approximately how many Sundays did you attend any church this past year?			
0-4x = 29%	5-12x = 14%	13-24x = 12%	25+ = 46%

Other researchers have identified the threshold for what defines a “regular attender” at once a month.¹ By this definition, 43 percent of those who attended the festival event had either a marginal connection with a church or none at all. From the perspective of Constance, the event was a success, bringing approximately 1,300 people on campus who have minimal involvement with a church.

The next part of the survey to be studied was the relationship between church attendance and the answers given to the questions related to biblical knowledge. Each of the question will be reviewed on the basis of the percentage of correct answers.

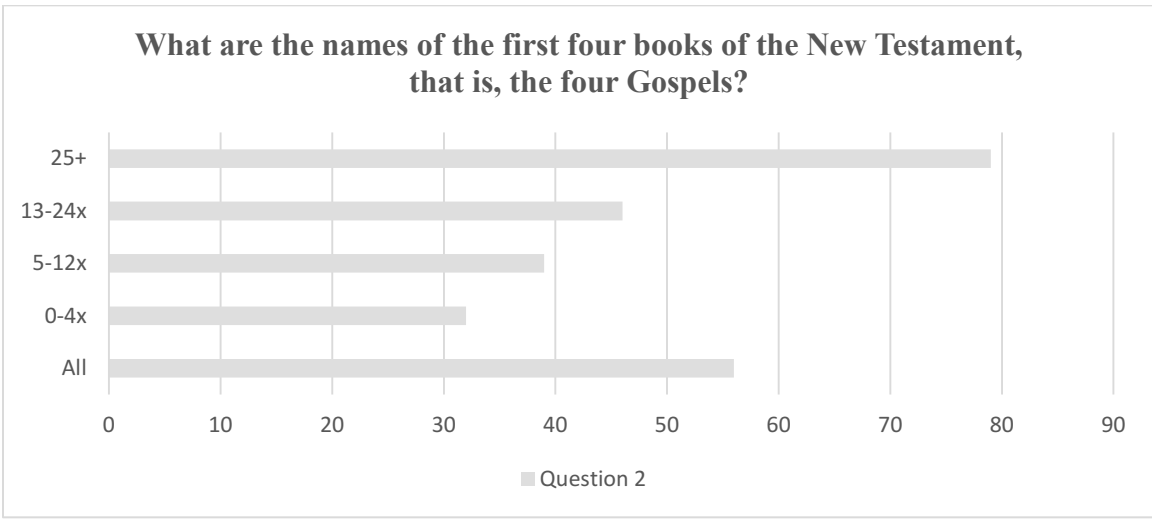
¹ George Barna and David Kinnaman, *Churchless* (Austin TX: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 7.

Table Survey Question 1:



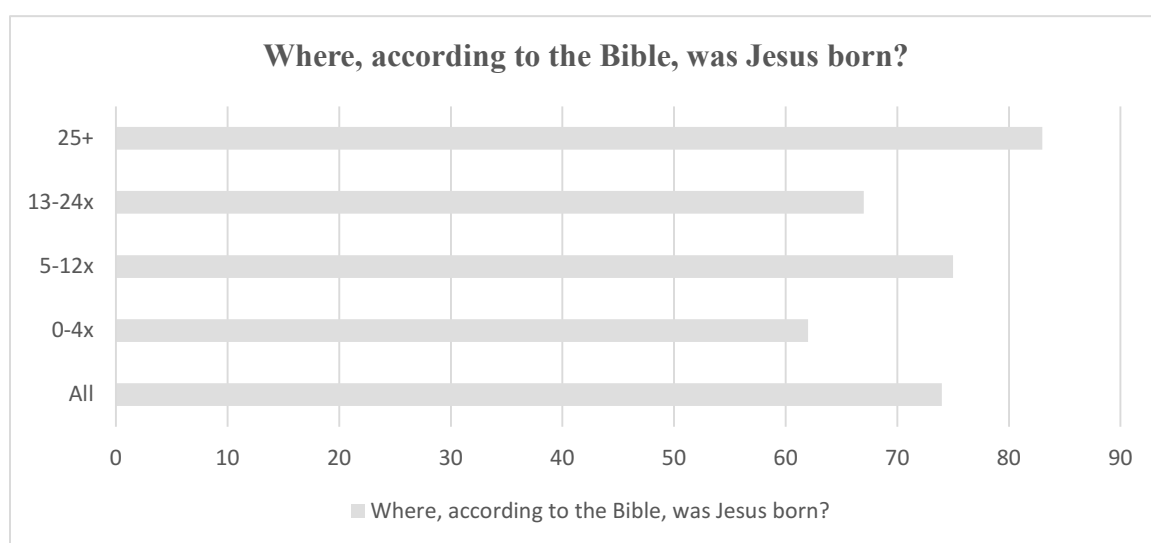
The first question was an open question, requiring the respondent to identify “Genesis” without any available suggestions. Sixty nine percent of all respondents were able to write down the correct answer. An interesting feature of the data is that those who attended 5-12 times a year actually performed better (+4 percent) on this question than those who attended 13-24 times a year. The appropriate observation is that there is not a clear causative effect between the number of times a person attends church and their ability to identify Genesis as the first book of the Bible.

Table Survey Question 2:



The second question was also an open question, requiring the participant to identify “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John” from their memory. No other question had a greater disparity between those who attend 0-4 times a year and those who attend 25 or more times a year, a full 47 percent. Interestingly, the incremental increases (7 percent) between the lower attendance rates was changed dramatically for those who attend more than 25 times a year (27 percent).

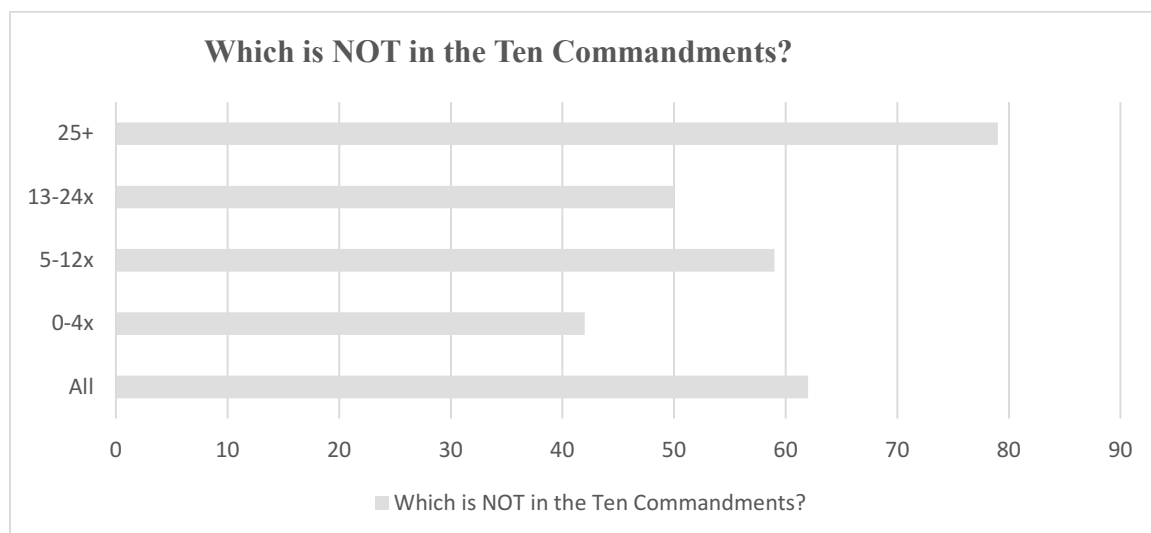
Table Survey Question 3:



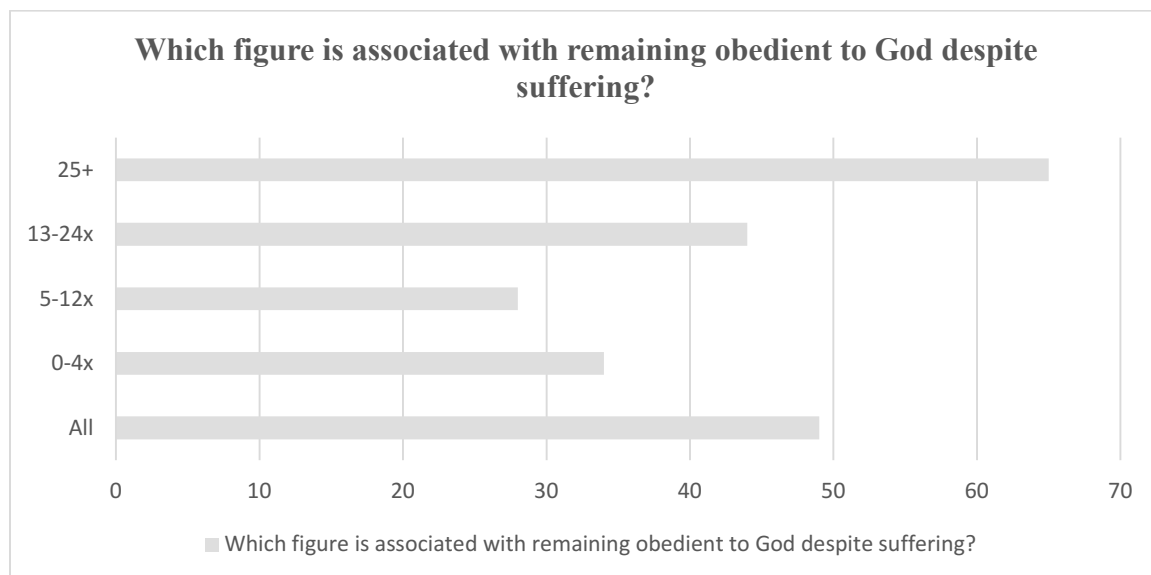
This question was a multiple-choice question, with respondents needing to choose between Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Jericho to correctly identify Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus. The average number of correct responses to this question was higher than any other question, 74 percent. In surprising fashion, those who attend church less than 5 times a year were nearly as accurate as those who attend 13-24 times a year, falling short by only 5 percent. The popularity of Christmas and Christmas music probably gives a significant boost to general knowledge about Christmas. It should also be noted that, in the opinion of the researcher, this question might be labeled as a bit

confusing to those who know that Jesus is referred to as “Jesus of Nazareth” in the Bible (Matthew 21:11).

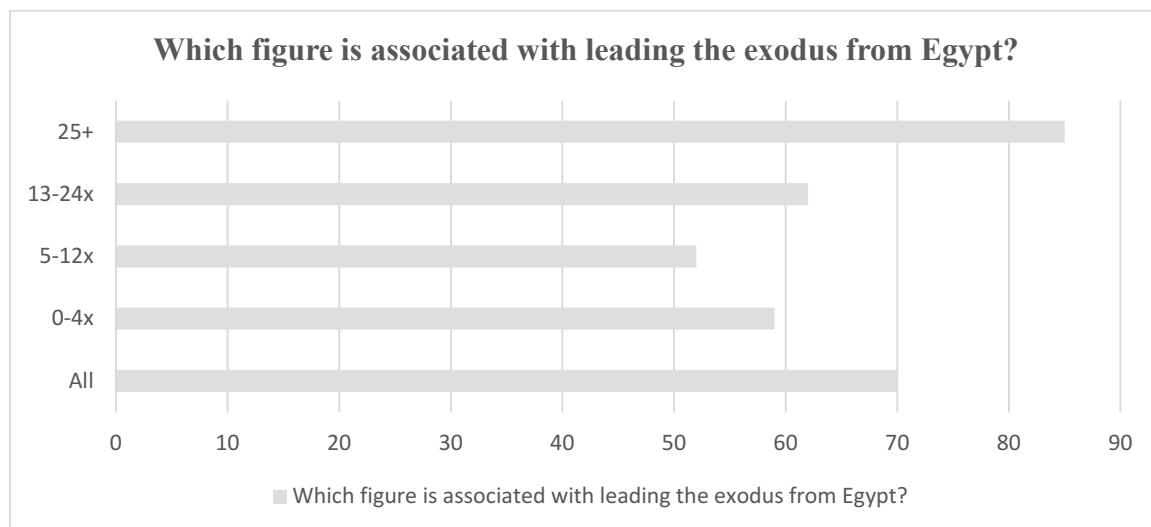
Table Survey Question 4:



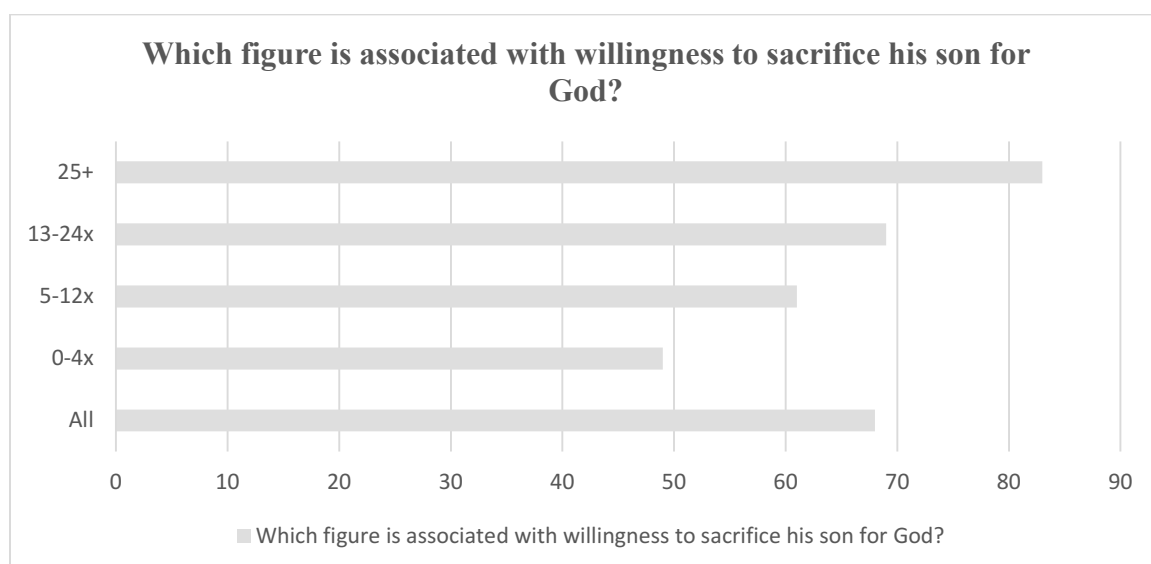
Respondents were asked to pick from the following statements to identify which does not belong: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” “Don’t steal.” “Don’t commit adultery.” “Remember to keep the Sabbath.” Overall, 62 percent were able to correctly identify that the Golden Rule, do unto others as you would have them do to you, is not one of the Ten Commandments. For the third time in the first four questions, those who attended church 5-12 times in the past year had more correct responses (59 percent) than those who attended 13-24 times (50 percent). The most common error was from those choosing “Remember to keep the Sabbath,” garnering 26 percent of all votes. Only two respondents choose the option of “Do not steal.” In other words, 99.6 percent of all respondents knew that the prohibition against stealing was part of the Ten Commandments.

Table Survey Question 5:

The fifth question on the survey was a multiple-choice question, offering the options of Elijah, Job, Moses, and Abraham. No question proved more difficult, with only 49 percent of respondents able to identify Job as the correct answer. With four possible answers, every person had a 25 percent chance of guessing the correct answer and those who attended church 5-12 times in the previous year did only marginally better than a guess with only 28 percent being correct. Even those who attended church 0-4 times scored better than those who attended 5-12 times. Identifying Job was the most difficult question to answer for those who attended 25 or more times, with only 65 percent being correct.

Table Survey Question 6:

Question six was another multiple-choice question offering Elijah, Job, Moses, and Abraham as the possible answers, with 70 percent of respondents able to choose Moses as the correct answer. Those who attended church 0-4 times in the last year fared better than those who attended 5-12 times, 59 percent to 52 percent.

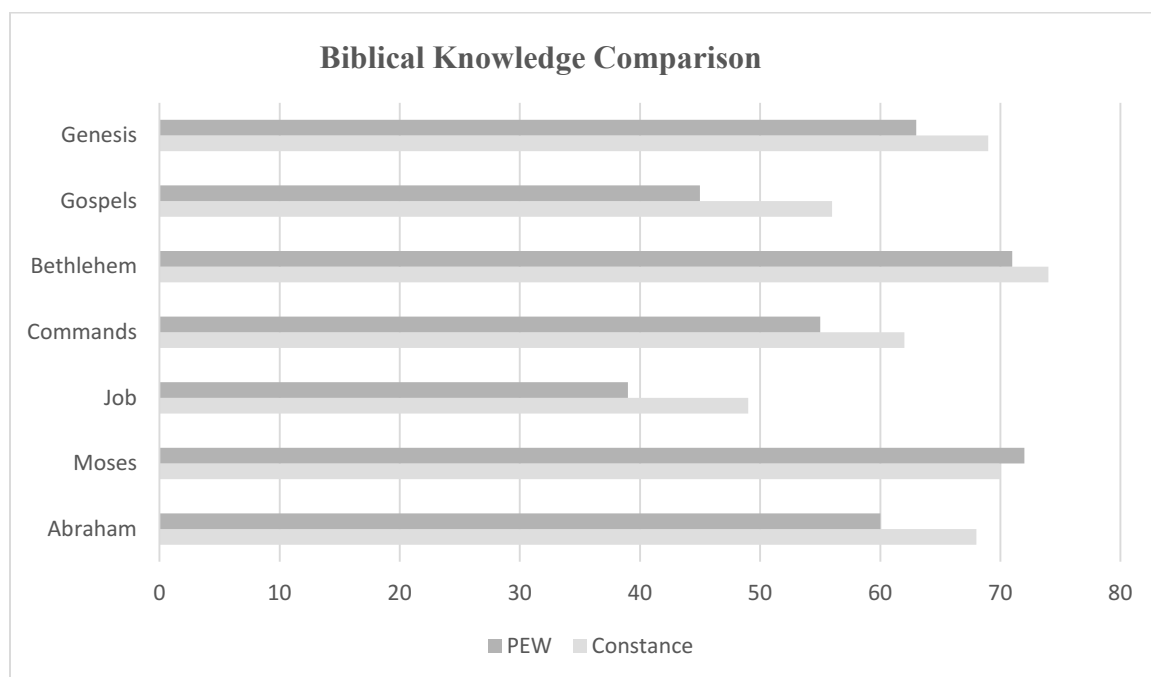
Table Survey Question 7:

The final question of the survey was a multiple-choice question with the options of Abraham, Elijah, Moses, and Job as possible choices for the one who was willing to

sacrifice his son for God. Sixty-eight percent of all respondents were able to correctly identify Abraham. Those who attended church on a more regular basis were better able to answer this question.

Since the Constance survey used the same questions used in a Pew research study, a comparison was made between the results. There were two significant differences in how the surveys were conducted. First of all, the Pew survey was administered orally, either in person or by phone. The Constance survey was completed by the respondent writing their answers. Secondly, the Constance survey was conducted at an event on church property. While it is unknown how these factors influenced the kinds of people completing the survey, the differences need to be noted.

Table 9: Biblical Knowledge Comparison, Pew and Constance



The Constance respondents fared slightly better than the national study on six of the seven questions. The largest discrepancy was being able to identify Job, a +10 percent

difference. The smallest discrepancy was on being able to identify Moses, a -2 percent difference. The reason for scoring higher on the survey is beyond the scope of this study.

Analysis of Survey Results

Conducting the survey was interesting. The response of some who completed the survey was that it was “very easy,” stating they would be surprised if anyone missed answering the questions correctly. Some respondents were quite flippant in completing the survey and others were very thoughtful, taking as much as 15 minutes to complete the questions. One of the most interesting exchanges was with a man who stated that he thought he did pretty well on the survey, but he didn’t know the first question, the one about the first book of the Bible. After he turned in his survey, he took the researcher aside and asked for the answer on the first question. When he was told, his response was, “Oh rats. I should have thought of *Star Trek* and then I bet I would have remembered that *Genesis* was one of the movie subtitles.”

There are several general observations that could be made about the data. First of all, it should be noted that it is remarkable that people have as much biblical knowledge as they do. It is hard to imagine a country on earth where nearly half (49 percent) of the general population would be able to identify a person like Job who is not a central character in the Christian storyline. On the other hand, there is reason to see that while the glass is “half-full,” it is also a sobering reality to see that the glass is also “half-empty.” If a person from a nonchurched background would walk into one of our churches and listen to a sermon, there is a very good chance that he/she would not be familiar with the passage of Scripture being used. Using a phrase like “Remember the suffering of Job”

might be enough for some long-time students of the Bible to get the point across, but the person beginning their journey of faith would be confused and probably discouraged.

Perhaps the more troubling conclusion from the data is the lack of knowledge for those who attend the majority of Sundays. Seeing that 79 percent of the most faithful can identify the names of the four Gospels is not encouraging, but rather a source of concern. This means that of every ten people who sit in church most Sundays, two of them could not identify the Gospels and they would not know that keeping the Sabbath is a command.

There is another interesting feature of the data gathered at Constance. In all seven questions asked, those who attend church more than 25 times a year were able to demonstrate the most biblical knowledge. However, there were only two questions of the seven where the other levels of attendance showed a consistent progression of biblical knowledge that aligned with their attendance. On three of the questions, those who attended 5-12 times scored better than those who attended 13-24 times. On two of the questions, the one about Job and the one about Moses, those who attended 0-4 times in the last year scored better than those who attended 5-12 times.

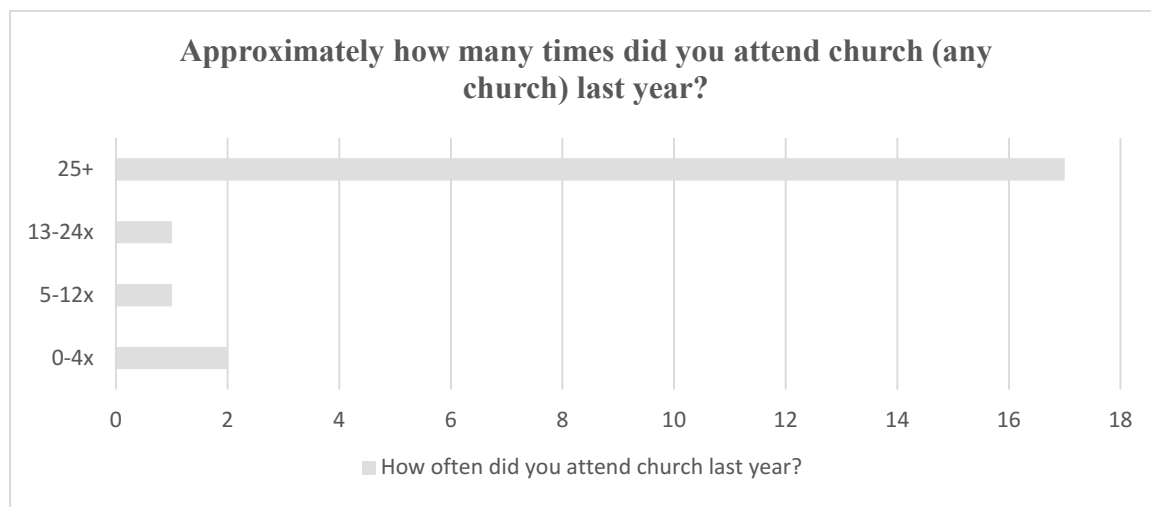
Online Interview

The Research Process

An online interview was conducted, pursuing information from those who had recently registered as “guests” at Constance Evangelical Free Church. The questions were crafted by the researcher with the assistance of his administrative support person and the church communications director. Care was used to have questions that were as clear as possible and as simple as possible. The interview consisted of seven questions. Once the

questions were finalized, an email list was comprised of all those guests who had given their email address over the last five months, from June 18, 2018, to November 18, 2018. A total of 84 were sent out using Survey Monkey. This allowed for anonymous responses. Twenty-one responses were received.

Table Online Question 1: Church Attendance



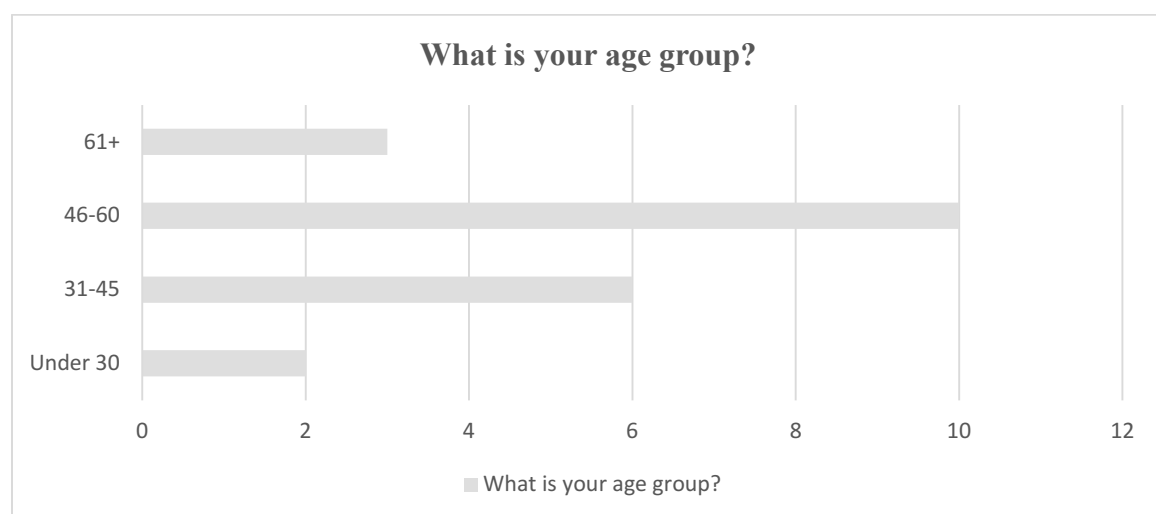
The wording of the first question was identical to the attendance question used in the Palooza Survey. This approach was not used for comparative purposes, but for the sake of clarity and consistency.

The overwhelming majority (81 percent) of the online interview respondents reported themselves to be very active in church attendance. From the beginning of this study it was understood that it would be a challenge to get responses from those least committed to church attendance. Even those who stated they attended less than 25 times the past year showed from other responses that they had significant church backgrounds. For example, the individual who stated he/she attended less than five times the previous year also stated that they attended a Christian school, desired sermons to be based on the Bible, and was interested in sermons on topics “other than the Gospels, Acts, and

Romans.” These answers point to a person with a significant amount of church participation in their background.

The data does not mean that the only people visiting Constance are those who are already deeply committed to church attendance. The data does indicate that those who are already committed to attending church are those who are most willing to share their email address with the church and then would be willing to respond to an online interview such as this.

Table Online Question 2: Age Group



The second question was also used from the festival survey for the sake of consistency. The only observation to make at this time is that those who responded are from a very diverse age range.

The third question of the interview was “What topics would be good to address in a sermon?” The question was included primarily to move the respondent into a mode of more reflective thinking. The answers given were coded into three categories to give an overall perspective of the responses. Since a vast majority of the respondents desired the sermon to be based on the Bible, all the categories reflect that commitment by being

“biblical.” The names given to the categories are “Biblically Deep, “Biblically Theological,” and “Biblically Practical.”

CODING FOR POTENTIAL SERMON TOPICS		
Biblically Deep	Biblically Topical	Biblically Practical
Bible Book	Heaven/Angels	Relationships
Deep Doctrine	Eschatology	Addictions
Expository	Spiritual Disciplines	Community
More than Gospels	Truth, Not Feelings	Forgiveness
	Biblical Discipleship	Parenting
	Faith	Leadership
	Walk with Christ	Pride
	Holy Spirit	Friendship
	Blood of Jesus	Better Marriages
	Knowing God	Resisting Sin

Those categorized as looking for “Biblically Deep” sermons were those people who didn’t seem to care about the topic as much as they cared about the sermon taking a deeper and more intellectual approach to the passage. The title of “Biblically Topical” was assigned to the responses that were more topical in nature, but were on topics that were about having good theology and good understanding of biblical concepts. Finally, the “Biblically Practical” designation represented those responses where individuals were looking for sermons that were practical to the issues of life. There was a heavy bias toward having good relationships, from friendships to marriages to forgiveness.

Table Online Question 3: Sermon Topics

It is interesting that even when encouraged to give a “topic” to address in a sermon, five respondents gave a more philosophical answer, desiring an expository sermon over a topical one.

In tracking the four respondents who stated they attended church less than 25 times last year, only one gave a response that was categorized as “Biblically Practical.” Two gave suggestions that were labeled as “Biblically Topical,” and one person under 30 who attended church less than four times requested a sermon series on a book of the Bible.

The fourth question of the questionnaire addressed the core issue as related to this project. The question was, “Do you ever come away from a sermon confused? If so, what typically causes the confusion?” In looking at the various responses, only a simple coding system was needed to gain some clarity on the answers to this question. All the responses fit into three categories. The first category covered all those who responded that they had not experienced confusion in a sermon. All those who had experienced confusion were

able to be identified with two primary designations. One of those categories covered those who had experienced some confusion, but the confusion was due to the approach of the preacher; either the preacher's outline did not fit the text or the preacher's style was not linear enough for the listener to follow the line of reasoning. The other category covered those who had experienced confusion because they didn't know what the preacher was talking about, that the context was beyond the understanding of the listener.

CODING FOR WHETHER CONFUSED BY A SERMON		
No	Unclear Preaching	Didn't Understand
No	Went in circles	Confused by OT allusions
	No alignment to text	Terms I didn't understand
	Veered off topic	OT names I didn't know
	Misinterpreted	

Table Online Question 4: Confused by the Sermon

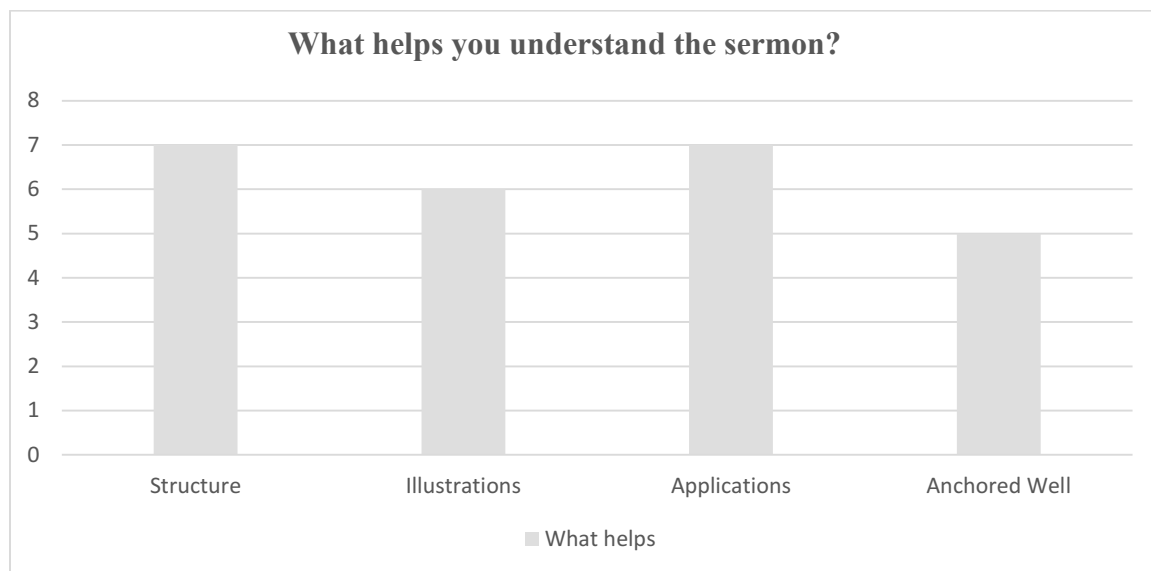


The first observation is that a majority of individuals have not been confused by a sermon. Interestingly, none of the four individuals who attended church less than 25 times last year responded as being confused listening to a sermon. Of the seven

respondents who felt that the sermon was unclear, two gave reasons that reflected a significantly high level of biblical knowledge. One stated, “The pastor misinterpreted the text” and one noted that “the sermon mentioned two commands from a verse, but there is only one command in the verse.” For these two respondents, any confusion they perceived was from an approach to the text that was inconsistent with what they felt the text stated. The other five respondents in this category stated they were either confused or “lost” due to the preacher’s rhetorical skills or lack thereof. It should be noted that the question was intended to refer to the respondent’s wider church experience. It is impossible to know what percentage of the answers reflected their wider experience and what percentage related specifically to their experience at Constance. Since all of the respondents demonstrated a certain level of connection to attending church studying the Bible, it is significant that 15 percent of them admitted being confused due to their lack of knowledge.

The fifth question of this survey asked respondents the following: “When a pastor preaches, what helps you understand the sermon?” Following is how the various responses were linked together:

CODING FOR WHAT HELPS			
Good Structure	Illustrations	Applications	Anchored
Notes	Personal stories	Examples	Verse by verse
Overview	Testimonies	Explanations	Bible backing
To the point	General stories	Relate to today	In-depth study
Clear	Illustrations		Principles from text

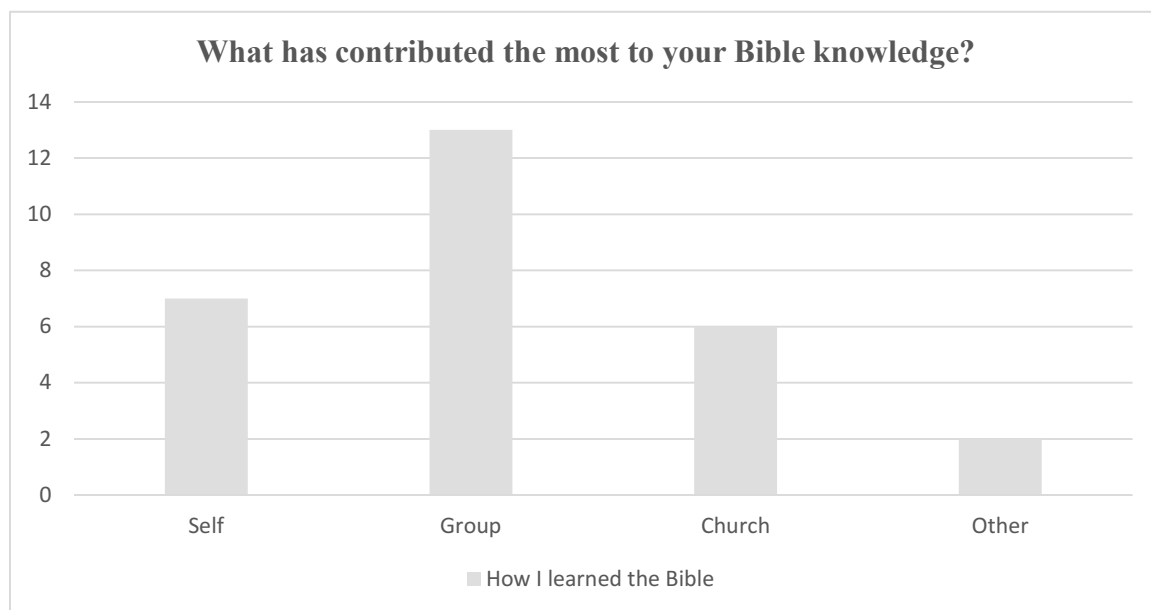
Table Online Question 5: What Helps Understanding?

The responses of the participants are consistent with the kinds of instruction most preachers have received. The sermons should be well anchored in the Bible and have a structure that is clear and easy to follow. Then, the message should be illustrated well, preferably from the preacher’s own life. Finally, make sure there is a clear path of application so the sermon is not just a matter of good theory, but good practice.

The sixth question of the questionnaire reads, “Is it important to you that the sermon is based on what the Bible says? Why?” Of the 21 respondents, 20 answered in the affirmative, with the reason being that the Bible is the Word of God and there is no other reason to listen to a sermon unless it is to learn more about God. All four of the people who attended church less than 25 times last year were in unanimous agreement that the sermon should be based on the Bible. The one individual who gave a different response said, “Not really. I think sermons can be based on other teachings as well.” This individual stated that they did attend a church more than 24 times this past year.

The final question of the survey was, “What has contributed the most to your current level of biblical knowledge?”

Table Online Question 7: How I Learned the Bible



The respondents identified that the most common locale of growth was in some sort of group study, with personal study being the second highest response. Those that identified that their learning came “In Church” were referring to their entire church experience, not specifically to listening to sermons. There were two responses that gave “Other” responses. One of those referenced the source of their biblical knowledge being their travels and the other referenced that their mother was the primary source of their knowledge. Both of these respondents stated that they attended church more than 24 times last year.

Analysis of Online Interview Results

In one sense, the online interview process was not able to capture the responses of those with minimal church background who might attend Constance. The researcher was not able to capture their email addresses and even if he did, those individuals did not fill

out the survey. However, that does not mean that the researcher was unable to learn anything from the data. There were several interesting items of note. First of all, it was interesting that those who attended a church less than 25 times last year still held the Bible in high regard. Even the person who attended less than five times in the last year maintained that the sermon must be based on the Bible. The data would indicate that there is not a one-to-one corollary between church attendance and one's level of confusion when listening to a sermon.

Secondly, it is interesting to note the number of individuals who come to church on a regular basis but still have times when they are unable to follow the thought content of the sermon. While some are not able to follow the logical flow of the sermon, a significant number (15 percent) indicated that they are at times confused due to their lack of biblical knowledge. If this is true for those with a considerable church background and for those who attend 25 or more times in a year, the statistics can only be worse for those with less background in the Bible and less exposure to church life.

Lastly, it is interesting to note the number of people who, even though they have significant church involvement over the past year, are still visiting other churches in hope of finding a church home.

Interviews of Pastors

The research for this project included interviews with three pastors who are the regular preachers in their respective congregations. Each has a reputation for giving leadership to a ministry that is effective in engaging our current culture and have people from a minimal church background in attendance on a regular basis. Each of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in an organic conversation about their views on

preaching in general, and specifically the attention they give to preaching to our current cultural setting. The names of those interviewed have been altered.

Interview with “Bill”

Bill is the founding pastor of a rather unconventional church located in the metro Minneapolis area. Bill graduated from Bethel Seminary and spent several years serving at Wooddale Church, a very large Baptist church located in suburban Minnesota. Bill is in his fifties, but is still connecting well with those in their twenties and thirties. Bill is an author and has written several books on various topics related to church ministry in the twenty-first century and is sought after as a communicator. Bill’s style and approach to ministry are quite unique. While his insights were valuable, it is hard to imagine that Bill’s style could be easily reproduced in most preachers.

By his own admission, Bill is rather critical of what preaching has become. From his perspective there are two primary problems with our traditional view of preaching. The first problem is that preaching, as we know it, implies that the person sitting in the pew will “grow” by merely listening to a sermon. This simply isn’t true. Spiritual growth happens through engagement and hard work, not merely listening. The second problem with the preaching exchange is the preacher him/herself. Preachers have a huge temptation to think of their words as being so profound that they can “bedazzle” the listener into learning. Such thinking is very toxic in that the preacher begins to imagine that he/she is the “secret sauce” that makes people grow.

Bill spoke of three words that would better serve the church related to preaching: progression, implication, and dialogue. Progression is the idea that the sermon is a story that is unfolding, as opposed to a presentation of static information. Implication, for Bill,

is a better word than the normal word that preachers use, application. While application can feel like a summary thought that is added by the preacher, implication is the sense that the listener has found themselves in the sermon preached, that they have been implicated by the message because it is about them. Finally, Bill has developed a preaching style that is based on dialogue as opposed to the monologue presentation of most preachers. Bill's method is to enter a dialogue with those who are in attendance. While he is certainly well prepared on the text or topic, he allows the sermon to develop out of the comments and observations of the congregation. In this way, the learning experience grows and develops out of the shared experience.

When asked about the changing level of biblical knowledge of our culture, Bill noted that he thinks about it "all the time" during his preparation. However, he has come to embrace this lack of knowledge as a "feature, not a flaw." In some cases, Bill pointed out, this lack of knowledge could be considered an advantage rather than a disadvantage. For example, a person might have a basic understanding of Jonah being a story about a whale. This basic understanding, however, actually can get in the way of discovering what the story of Jonah is actually trying to communicate to us.

Another insight Bill shared was a lesson he learned from being an author. In a seminar on what makes a book sell well, he learned it is when a reader recommends the book to a friend. The number one reason a reader would recommend a book to a friend is that "the author made me feel smart." From this insight, Bill realized that the worst possible thing for a person who is looking for truth is making them feel foolish or dumb. Sermons that assume the listener should know things they don't understand is of great detriment to the learning process.

Interview with “Tom”

Tom is a graduate of Bethel Seminary and is an exceptional preacher. Tom is a thirtysomething pastor who is currently planting a church with Converge, a Baptist denomination. Starting without even a core of a new church, Tom has given leadership to a congregation that is flourishing, many coming from a nominal level of church involvement.

When talking about preaching, Tom first of all spoke about the weight of preaching. While it is an activity he enjoys and is gifted at, there is always the burden of representing God’s truth to others. Truth matters, words matter, and he has 30-some minutes each week to say something that matters.

When asked about speaking to the culture of the day, Tom stated that he thinks of a random 17-year-old student as he prepares. For a teenager, it is almost impossible to avoid the culture of the day. As a person gets older, they end up choosing a culture to be part of and one of those cultures might be a very “churched” subculture. One can listen to Christian radio, attend church, have church friends, and avoid other cultures to a certain extent. A teenager, however, hardly has that choice. Tom believes that as he speaks to a teenager, he can hit everyone else as well. He believes firmly that when preparing a message, a preacher can say things that are both enlightening to a long-time believer and say things that are understandable to a person new to Christianity.

One of the things Tom disciplines himself to do is to focus on the main theme of a text, not getting lost in the details. According to Tom, it is “us nerds” who love to dig into the minutiae of a text, but the average person wants to focus on the central theme or storyline. Being a “nerd,” there are times when Tom spends considerable time chasing

down a detail he is interested in, only to leave it on the editing floor because while the information is interesting, it isn't helpful to the point of the message.

Tom's perspective is that we live in a post-biblical society. As such, his assumption is that those attending his church do not know the basic Bible stories previous generations learned going to Sunday school. With this perspective in mind, he can't throw in a story about Abraham and Isaac without giving sufficient context to the story. Recently, he preached on how powerful we can become when we are willing to die to self and live to the glory of God. Tom used Sampson as an illustration of this principle but used a full five minutes setting the scene for his congregation.

For Tom, there are two vital components to every sermon he preaches. The first component is the biblical text. He invests his labor in exegeting the text, wanting to discern its truth before he preaches. The second focus of his preparation is to carefully exegete the people to whom he is preaching. Without fully understanding the culture to which he is preaching, he will not be able to clearly communicate the truth of God's Word.

Interview with "Sam"

Sam preaches in a church that is located in the center of Minneapolis. Located in a church building that has been standing for well over 100 years, the church is fresh and alive and very young. While Sam is in his fifties, the average age of those in the church is about 30. Sam would be considered to be conservative in theology and holds to the truth claims of the Bible. At the same time his church ministers to those from virtually every persuasion and background.

The first thing Sam mentioned about preaching is that they consider it the “hors d’oeuvre” of the church and not the main course. As such, it continually reminds everyone that the goal is not for attenders to come and merely gain some information for their life, but that the goal is to adopt an entire lifestyle that centers around the person and work of Jesus. Sam’s preaching style is generally to go through a book of the Bible in a way that is relevant and reverent.

Sam was very candid about the changing culture of our day. A generation ago, if someone told their friend that they had decided to become a Christian, the friend would likely say something to the effect of, “Oh no. Now you won’t want to do the things we have been doing that I consider ‘fun.’” Now, the response to the same information about becoming a Christian would be, “Oh no. You have decided to become evil, judgmental, intolerant, and homophobic.” Since the culture of our day has its own catechism, Sam assumes that every person who is new to his church is pro-choice and pro-gay marriage. It is a given.

Sam loves to hold up the Bible in a way that pokes holes into the preconceptions of what the Bible says. He knows that he can’t give short, simplistic answers to complex questions because his audience won’t accept shallow answers. For example, when speaking on the topic of sexual sin, Sam begins with the foundations of what sex is supposed to be and how our sinful nature is so broken that we have made it into something else. Sam does not address the common list of sexual sins until he lays a broader foundation that shows that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s ideal.

Sam also assumes that his audience comes in with virtually no biblical knowledge and that what people do know about the Bible is probably distorted and incomplete. He

insists that preachers should not “dumb down” the message of the Bible, but that they do need to make it understandable. Sam also wants to create an environment where people honestly believe they can study the Bible themselves. Instead of implying that he discovered things about the text that are beyond the normal human, Sam points out words they can Google or look up through a simple website or app.

Sam spoke of the importance of approaching his congregation as a missionary would, always on the lookout for ways to contextualize the message for Christ for the benefit of those he is speaking to. He pointed out that one of the ways missionaries show they love the people in the culture they have been called to is that they learn to speak the language of the natives. We need to love our world in the same way, learning to speak their language.

Finally, Sam shared his three rules for preaching, things he wants to be clear about every week. First of all, Jesus is the hero of the story. For Sam, if he has in any way communicated what a great guy he is instead how great a God Jesus is, he has failed. Secondly, Sam wants to communicate that Jesus is the answer to the problems of life, not that the listener needs to try harder. Finally, Sam is committed to honoring the sacred relationship between someone who attends and the guest they have brought. Sam wants to make sure that he never says anything flippantly that would either embarrass the host or confuse the guest.

CHAPTER SIX: PRINCIPLES FOR PREACHING IN 2019

The focus of this project has been on preaching in a way that connects well with people who live in our current culture. Between our society's general level of biblical illiteracy, our marginalizing of the importance of church attendance, and the effects of shifting from a modern to postmodern world, there is reason to believe that an evaluation of current practices of preachers is warranted. The researcher holds a deep belief in the power of the gospel message to alter both the present and the eternity of the person who puts their trust in Christ. He also has a deep love for communicating the life-giving message of Jesus and a deep commitment to the authoritative truth of the Bible. Within this framework, the researcher embarked on a process of discovery through studying the preaching of the apostle Paul, through extensive reading on the subject of preaching as related to our culture, through research on the current level of biblical understanding of people, and through observation and reflection. From these various streams of information, the researcher would present the following principles of preaching to guide the communicator of biblical truth to people in our current culture.

1. Exegete the Culture
2. Be Less Assumptive
3. Tell the Story of the Bible
4. Widen How Truth Is Discerned
5. Preach as a Participant
6. Anticipate Resistance
7. Preach to the Whole Person
8. Preach Jesus

Exegete the Culture

Preachers who are committed to communicating the truth of the Bible have been taught that the priority of their sermonic preparation is to exegete the text. One of the

mantras taught in the preaching classes of the seminary the researcher attended was that one should keep his “finger on the text” at all times. This was and is good counsel. However, in addition to accurately exegeting the text there is an added responsibility for the effective preacher: to exegete the culture. “Stop Starting with the Text” is the catchy title of an article by Rod Casey.¹ His argument is that preachers need to spend more time studying their audiences than has been general practice in Bible-preaching churches. An error committed by some preachers is that they pretend that culture is not a factor in their preaching, that their message is timeless. While the message is timeless, the form of that message is not. It is imperative for the preacher to recognize changes in the way people receive information, or they will be attempting to drive a square peg into a round hole.

The apostle Paul demonstrated what it looks like to exegete the culture of the audience and then to adapt his message accordingly. His message to the residents of Athens was dramatically different from the form of his message to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch. He was doing the contextualization work of a missionary. It is necessary for preachers in twenty-first century America to view themselves as missionaries in a foreign country, a country that is significantly different from the world of even 50 years ago.²

Exegeting the culture is not a matter of merely immersing oneself in current styles of clothing and music. It is a matter of discerning the heart cry of the current generation, one that is reflected in their music, their movies, and most importantly, their lifestyle choices. This work requires diligence and careful listening. Haddon Robinson said,

¹ Rod Casey, “Stop Starting With the Text,” *Preaching Today*, accessed April 26, 2017. www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2014/september/stop-starting-with-the-text.html.

² Altrock, 10.

“Speaking to a broader audience requires a sacrifice from us.”³ This sacrifice is seeing the world through eyes other than our own, crafting words and using language that at times feels foreign. It is the work of a missionary, learning the practices and values of those native to the land.

One of the great challenges of exegeting the culture is that it keeps changing. It is not a task that can be done once, but must continue to adjust to a moving target. In something as simple as how people buy music, American culture has quickly moved from records to 8-tracks to cassettes to CDs. For those who are now in their teens, many will never own any music other than in digital form, with the possible exception being those who desire to be retro and go back to vinyl. In similar fashion, a social media platform like Facebook has gone from the cutting-edge way that young people connect to an antiquated platform where older people connect with their family and former high school classmates. The rate of change is rather breathtaking, and the changes in technology represent only one facet of change. American culture continues to develop a bias against not only the truth claims of Christianity, but against the arrogance (perceived and real) of many Christians. The preacher who fails to recognize the attitudes of the world in which they live will soon be deemed irrelevant.

It might be tempting for the experienced preacher to conclude that the world of today is somehow worse than the one of yesterday. The researcher has often heard other preachers bemoan the shortcomings of the effects of postmodernism, the values of millennials, and critique the expectations placed on them of needing to be “politically correct.” Such rhetoric will not be helpful in communicating to the current culture.

³ Brown, Robinson, and Willimon, 72.

Furthermore, such a perspective can easily foster an attitude of arrogance that a younger person will detect and create a guarded response to the preacher. It would be wise for the preacher to see the world as different from that of 50 years ago, not worse. The truth of the matter is that every generation has its own issues, and any negative aspect of the current generation is merely the offspring of the negative issues of the prior generation.

Be Less Assumptive

Preachers need to become aware of “The Curse of Knowledge.”⁴ It is the villain of all communication. Those who are on the “inside” and have become experts in a field naturally assume that others will know technical language and abbreviations that have become common information in their area of expertise. An illustration of this principle is that of “the tappers and the listeners,” found in *Made to Stick*.⁵ The tapper has a song in his head and begins to tap out the beat of the song with their finger on a table. The listener is to figure out what the song is by its distinctive rhythm. The norm is for the tapper to become at least somewhat irritated at the inability of the listener to identify the song. What is so clear in the tapper’s mind is unrecognizable to the listener. Thus, the curse of knowledge. Those in the pulpit are not immune to this curse. While the preacher has spent perhaps 20 hours or more preparing a message and a lifetime in studying biblical texts and topics, the person in the pew has not been afforded that luxury. It is a great temptation to assume people know more than they do. A related curse is assuming that others care about any topic as much as the preacher does. This doesn’t mean that the

⁴ Heath and Heath, 19.

⁵ Heath and Heath, 20.

listener doesn't love Jesus as much or the Bible. It just means that they have not invested the hours digging into the meaning of a particular word or phrase as the preacher.

Another pitfall for the preacher trained in the historical-critical method of textual study is the curse of information. To preach clearly in such a way that the listener is more likely to remember the message, the goal needs to be simplicity.⁶ As such, preachers must become masters of exclusion, not allowing the clutter of detail to obscure the main point of the text. Even when having a clear central idea, preachers generally struggle with the editing process. Many sermons simply have too much good information in them, information that is good but not central to the core of the story. The hard part of editing is not getting rid of the poor information, but winnowing out the information that is good but not helpful.⁷ Preachers can learn much from the work of film editors, taking hundreds of hours of film and cutting until only that which is essential to the telling of the story remains.

Preachers of today need to accept that the average person in American culture knows less of the Bible than those from a generation ago. James Emery White points out that in the 1960s, an average person who did not know Christ had a basic religious foundation that had several beliefs that were consistent with Christianity: a belief in God, a belief in moral absolutes, and a positive view of church leadership.⁸ None of this exists for Americans in the twenty-first century. Basic Bible stories are not known by the majority of people and, if they are, the stories are often unrecognizable from the purpose of the given text. The researcher has personally had conversations with a church-

⁶ Heath and Heath, 16.

⁷ Heath and Heath, 28.

⁸ White, 99-101.

attending individual in his thirties who didn't know why John was called "the Baptist." The research detailed in this study demonstrates that many who attend church struggle with proficiency in biblical knowledge and those who are in the margins of religious involvement know even less. In preparing a sermon for a typical congregation it is best to assume they do not know anything to do with church history, historical church leaders, seminary staff, authors of theological works, or the technical language of theology. Even terms like "the gospel" or "the great commission" are unknown to some and confusing to most. This does not mean preachers shouldn't use such language, but it demands that they explain such words clearly. Preachers also need to be aware of their expository and ecclesiastical ethnicity. Preachers need to remember that all people speak with an accent.⁹ The temptation to reference someone or something from one's religious heritage will endear the preacher to those from a common heritage but will distance him/her from all others. Preachers cannot afford to create distance, especially with those on the margins of church life.

Communicating in today's culture necessitates that preachers start farther back in the biblical worldview and the biblical story.¹⁰ There is reason to return often to the telling of the basic story of the Bible, from creation to final restoration. Illustrations involving biblical stories are very appropriate to use, but the preacher must introduce the story with sufficient background. Giving a quick reference to the suffering of Job is detrimental to the 50 percent of church attenders who don't know who Job is. The need for clarity is at times counterintuitive to the preacher, in that he/she knows the material

⁹ Jack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 182.

¹⁰ Altrock, 52.

well and will be reinforced in the belief that he/she is connecting by the affirming nods of a few well-versed saints. In the process of interviewing three preachers who are effective at communicating in/to our current culture, one of the few things all three had in common was their assumption that their listeners did not know the Bible. This perspective was one of the keys to their effectiveness.

Tell the Story of the Bible

Talking about “story” has become a rather popular motif in recent years. It is an important theme, one that is probably more important than preachers in general have grasped. When preachers hear “story,” they tend to hear “illustration” or “testimony.” With that thinking, the core of the message preached is still the propositional declaration of the preacher and he/she looks for stories and perhaps a testimony to support and illustrate those declarations. There is, however, more to the use of story. Theology in the Western world in many ways has tended to overlook and marginalize the narrative nature of Scripture.¹¹ One contributing factor to this shift was that the King James Bible, the standard English translation used for over 300 years, did not record the Psalms in a poetic form. As such, people did not approach them as art, but as information to be analyzed.

First of all, it is helpful to view all of the Bible as God’s grand story. In one sense, the Bible begins with “once upon a time” and concludes with “and they all lived happily ever after.”¹² In the modern era, the Bible was analyzed and critiqued as the scientific method would demand. While it could be argued that the Bible has held up well under this scrutiny, the concept of the Bible as “story” has been minimized. An example of this

¹¹ Lubeck, 5.

¹² Lubeck, 10.

tendency can be seen in how a preacher might approach the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3). There are four times in this chapter when a group of musical instruments are listed, in verses 5, 7, 10, and 15. An analyst would study this information trying to discern the importance of these instruments and to even work at identifying each and the significance of each being included. The storyteller will look at this repetition and see that this is a rhetorical device used to tell the story in a way that it can be more easily remembered. Looking at the first six chapters of Daniel as stories of faithfulness in a godless world brings new life to the text, stories that have great relevance to today's world. The whole of the story is more than its individual parts.

There is value in remembering that the Bible was written to a world that was primarily oral. The Gospel writers gathered and recorded what were first of all stories about Jesus communicated in oral tradition. This view does not take away from the authority of the Bible as we know it, but it should influence the way we study the text and how we communicate its truth. For example, take the story of the wise men following the star to find the location of the new king (Matt. 2). The historical-critical method of sermon preparation would first of all begin to dissect the chapter. There would be reason to first of all discover who these "wise men" were. Where they from Persia? Where they from Babylon? Are they mentioned other places in Scripture? Do they have anything in common with the magicians that Daniel dealt with? Were they astronomers or astrologers, or both? In theory, all of these questions need to be answered to understand the text. And then, the same sort of inquiry is needed on the nature of the "star" they followed. However, a storyteller comes to this chapter with a very different perspective. The storyteller is able to say, "Matthew tells us they were from the east and that is all that

is germane to the story. They followed a star. Whether that was a comet or a super nova or some other orb that could be scientifically described is not important to the story.” The storyteller is able to move more quickly into why Matthew decided that of all the stories available to him about Jesus, he chose to include this particular story in his Gospel. Knowing more about the magi and speculating on where they ever got the idea that a star in the sky indicated the birth of a Jewish king is interesting speculation, but does not help in telling the message of Matthew.

Storytelling is an effective means of communication. Jesus used it consistently and was comfortable to leave some questions unanswered. While storytelling does not live up to the values and structures of the modern era, it is a valuable approach in the postmodern world of today. Stories work by indirection. Working indirectly, they have a chance to break through the cultural filters that work in the heads of those who listen.¹³ For example, postmoderns would rather hear a story than a dictionary definition. Telling a story about patience is much more powerful than reading a definition of patience.¹⁴ In addition, there is reason not to use statistics and the results of research when communicating to postmoderns. People in our day have become cynical about how data is interpreted, seeing how information can be spun anyway the presenter desires. Having virtually all of the voting polls be wrong in the 2016 voting cycle proved that the interpretation of data can be deeply flawed by the interpreter.

There are, of course, sections of the Bible that are not written in a storytelling form. In those cases, a more propositional form of preaching is consistent with author’s

¹³ Jensen, 62.

¹⁴ Donald Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007), 129.

approach. However, there is reason to use story and a storytelling approach, especially when preaching through the Gospels and other narrative passages. As pointed out by Richard Jessen, “We don’t tell stories to entertain, to make things more interesting or to lighten up the preaching task for people. We tell stories in order that the Bible might come alive for people in ever new ways.”¹⁵

Widen How Truth Is Discerned

One of the great challenges for the twenty-first century preacher has to do with the issue of authority. In generations past, a vast majority of people believed in the concept of absolute truth and that “Someone” had the ultimate right to dictate that truth. For most in American culture, the Bible was accepted as an authority for living and conceded that the Church and the preacher stood in positions of authority...especially if the preacher could provide empirical or rational evidence for their truth claim. Postmoderns, however, recognize no universal standard of truth—no matter who says it.¹⁶ So, does the preacher claim the authority of Scripture to a world that does not accept any source of authority, or does the preacher alter his stance on authority? Picking a fight by insisting one has the “authority of the Bible” might make one feel like they have defended truth, but it is seldom helpful. The direct, frontal assault on someone’s position may be the simplest approach, but it rarely achieves the desired outcome.¹⁷ This does not mean that the preacher is no longer able to talk about unpopular topics such as sin, watering down the message of Christianity. The preacher is not accepting false things as true. It does mean that the preacher should be willing to reconsider the best way to

¹⁵ Jensen, 11.

¹⁶ Altrock, 23.

¹⁷ Johnston, 74.

approach a listener who does not believe in any sort of absolutes or authority. Not only are the premodern sources of authority (tradition and revelation) seen to be unreliable by today's thinkers, but the entire picture of the world that makes them plausible and intelligible has been abandoned.¹⁸

The apostle Paul demonstrated a willingness to use the cultural beliefs of the Athenians to enter conversation with them. He did not compromise the message, but he began by quoting their poets and he affirmed they were "right" when they built an altar to an unknown God, acknowledging there was a God they did not know (Acts 17:23). In essence, Paul allowed the culture to determine his entry point, even though he was still committed to talking about the one true God. He used their understanding of truth to further the conversation about truth. He focused on how they were "right" before he suggested in any way that they might be "wrong." Preachers of today can do the same, gaining authority by affirming the thinking and experience of our listeners. For example, a preacher could insist that sex outside of marriage is wrong because the Bible says so. Or, the preacher could speak of the research that shows that living together prior to marriage is detrimental to long-term satisfaction in marriage. The preacher could then point out that these findings should come as no surprise since this is exactly what God reveals in the Bible. The preacher can either insist on using the authority of Scripture as their stand-alone starting point, or allow the truth of Scripture to be revealed in life experience of the listeners. A preacher should be willing to proclaim that the Bible reveals truth. A preacher should also be willing to proclaim that the Bible affirms the true things revealed in life.

¹⁸ Penner, 50.

Timothy Keller has identified five different narratives worth pursuing.¹⁹ Each of these narratives begin with the claims of culture and then works back to the truth of Christianity.

-1. The Rationality Narrative. To a world that has embraced the importance of scientific reasoning, it is good to point out that it was Christianity that opened the door. It was Christianity that taught that the created world was good and orderly, something worth studying.

-2. The History Narrative. The premodern world thought that all of history was predetermined and cyclical. It was Christianity that supported the idea that history had purpose and direction.

-3. The Society Narrative. It was Christianity that taught each person has personal value, an identity that is not merely to be lost in the community.

- 4. The Morality/Justice Narrative. It was Christianity that taught us that we are our brother's keeper and that people can and should do something about injustice. Before a Christian worldview took hold, it was believed that everyone's lot in life was fixed and that the evil they faced was at the whim of the gods.

-5. The Identity Narrative. It is Christianity that teaches us that our value is found in who we are, not in how we perform in the world.

The preacher is able to meet the world on their turf without abandoning the truth of Christ. Preachers need to continue doing the work of a missionary to find the best entry points to talk about the cross of Christ and the priority of the resurrection.

Preach as a Participant

¹⁹Keller, 129ff

Part of the landscape of our current culture is that virtually everything is less formal than things were a generation ago. In clothing, for example, teachers were expected to wear dress clothes every day and the idea of a banker being at work in less than a suit was unheard of. Clergy, likewise were expected to wear the clothes of authority. However, culture has changed. Now, “Casual Friday” is the norm every day of the week. This change is a microcosm of how things have changed in other areas as well. In the past, we wanted our authority figures to dress the part, identifying that the professional was different from the layperson. That is no longer the case. The preacher is not to communicate how different he/she is from the layperson, but they are to communicate how much they have in common with the laity.

Haddon Robinson has pointed out that being an impersonal communicator is now a contradiction in terms.²⁰ The postmodern is turned off to the overconfident dispenser of truth, the one who claims to have arrived at the destination of truth. In this new dynamic, the preacher should be willing to bring more questions and fewer answers. Preaching that seems to claim that “the preacher never is plagued by questions will prove unhelpful to those who are, and it will give false comfort to those who insulate themselves from reflecting on such questions.”²¹ This is a significant shift from a generation ago. The researcher remembers vividly a time when he told a church member that he wasn’t 100 percent confident of what a specific Bible passage meant. The researcher was admonished and told sternly that he needed to figure it out. The culture of today is much

²⁰ Johnston, 129.

²¹ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, 182.

more open to the idea of living with questions and that some topics are not as cut and dried as some would claim.

To be received by those living in the current culture, preachers should speak as if they are less arrived and more on the journey. Steve Brown stated, “I’ve learned that if I’m going to communicate with the today’s world, I’m going to have to be as much a fellow struggler as herald of God’s Word.”²² Christian communicators must be able to show that they remember what it is like to doubt.²³

Anticipate Resistance

In a world dominated by modern thinking, it was understood that certain people, through study and hard work can end up in a position where they are experts in their field. As such, their words carry the weight of an authority. When going to a doctor, for example, no one would consider disagreeing with their diagnosis or plan of treatment. Today, however, is a new era. With sites such as WebMD, people have become their own doctors. When a plumber is needed, people can be their own plumber by going through the instructional videos on YouTube. They can become their own therapist by reading the plethora of books on the topic of choice, and a person can be their own spiritual guru by merely listening to one’s inner self. In such a new world, the preacher’s viewpoints will not be accepted blindly. Not only does the preacher not carry a position of authority, the more one attempts to claim a position of authority, the more they will be resisted. Instead of fighting this reality, the preacher needs to anticipate the kinds of push-back questions a thinking person might have. Also, he/she could include a statement such as “About now

²² Brown, Robinson, and Willimon, 41.

²³ Keller, 110.

you might be thinking...” Such an approach can give the listener the sense of being in a dialogue instead of listening to a monologue. Being in a conversation is much more engaging than being talked at.

A preacher gains credibility and has a better chance to proclaim truth if they acknowledge that there are legitimate questions the honest listener might have. While in the study, the preacher should be asking, “Why should someone accept what I am saying?” This path of inquiry allows for honest engagement with the question “Why?” The answers to the “Why?” questions are markedly different from the “What?” path of passing on information.

There is also wisdom in preaching with a more inductive style. As a reminder, a deductive style begins with a proclamation of truth and gives supporting arguments for that truth. An inductive style invites the listener into seeing the process by which the preacher came to their conclusion. It is the equivalent of “showing your work” in high school math classes.²⁴ From the researcher’s own experience, there has been a significant shift in the last 25 years in the most effective forms of dialogue. There was an old preaching mantra that claimed the preacher should “Tell them what you are going say. Say what you are going say. Tell them what you told them.” Such a formula is no longer as effective as it once was. Postmoderns are more willing to be led than to be told.

What is being proposed is a significant shift for some preachers. The postmodern perspective has deeply “undermined the apologetic paradigm of the past, compromising its ability to witness truthfully to Christ.”²⁵ Some preachers have adopted an attitude that

²⁴ Johnston, 75.

²⁵ Penner, 15.

conveys a “take-it-or-leave-it” approach to the truth of Christianity. Such an approach only requires the preacher to proclaim the truth as it is and the listener is expected to submit to the proclamation without thoughtful interaction. A better approach for engaging the current culture is to invite others to consider the truth of Christianity and to thoughtfully engage with the listener as if there was a conversation going on during the sermon.

Preach to the Whole Person

Preachers who have seminary training have many great and blessed benefits from their schooling. There are also some challenges. At least in evangelical seminaries, the system was dominated by modernity, taught by intellectual professors who were deeply committed to the importance of cognitive function. It was both expressed and implied that emotions are the enemy of the soul and that cognitive function is the key to gaining spiritual ground. Sadly, many preachers ended up with the misguided concept—an outgrowth of the Enlightenment—that gaining information will placate the unrelenting inner craving in our lives.²⁶ If preachers are going to be able to connect with a postmodern world, they will need to purposely engage the place where the head meets the heart.

From the researcher’s own experience, there are many churches where any sign of emotional or passionate engagement is considered a mark of being spiritually immature at best and emotionally unstable at worst. This dichotomy has never been helpful, and when communicating in the twenty-first century, it is fatal to communication. Postmodernists

²⁶ Loscalzo, 31.

question the Enlightenment notion that truth is purely rational. The person's emotions and intuition are just as critical as his reason in formulating one's knowledge of reality.²⁷

Modern studies have established the difference between the work of the right part of the brain and the left part. The right hemisphere of the brain is, for example, holistic, artistic, symbolic, intuitive, and creative. The left hemisphere of the brain is logical, mathematical, linear, sequential, intellectual, and analytic.²⁸ Change does not happen in a person's life until the entire brain is engaged. As such, the goal of preaching is not to merely communicate information, but to engage the entire person as to effect transformative change.

One of the benefits of storytelling is that the preacher has the opportunity to help the listener put themselves in the story. Doing so helps engage both the cognitive function of the brain, and to be involved emotionally at the same time. For example, in telling the story of the prodigal son from Luke 15, there are many parts of the story that are true and factual. A sermon could be preached based on this information. However, if the preacher could sufficiently set the stage of the story, he/she could help the listener put themselves in the place of the son in that moment where he "came to his senses." (Luke 15:17). If the listener can feel the horror and regret of that moment. . . or if the listener could put themselves on the road back home with all the fears and shame of the son, the listener has now been brought into the sermon as a participant instead of an observer.

There is reason, then, to preach with passion. Paul demonstrated that he was passionately involved with his ministry when he stated that he "never stopped warning

²⁷ Michael Scott Lloyd, "Is There Such a Thing as Objective Truth? Evangelical Reaction to Postmodernism" (master's thesis, Cincinnati Bible Seminary, 1999), 22.

²⁸ Jensen, 27.

you night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31). Obviously, Paul was not only intellectually invested in proclaiming the message of Christ, he was emotionally invested as well. Out of this kind of emotion and authenticity, the preacher will see preaching as more than the dissemination of information, and will speak to both the head and the heart.

Preach Jesus

While Christianity has a bad reputation in much of society, Jesus is still considered a person of integrity, someone worth listening to. Preachers have reason to talk about Jesus. Not only are his truth claims important, but so is the life that he lived. Consider preaching sermons on the emotions of Jesus, how he loved, was moved in compassion, and the kinds of things that made him angry. There are many sermons to be preached about the way Jesus cared for common people and sermons that would explore his interactions with children. Since the topic of “authority” is of great concern in our culture, investigate not only the authority of Jesus, but how he used that authority and how he never abused that authority. Sermons on the way Jesus interacted with the religious leaders of the day have great potential to be received well in a culture that has witnessed its share of religious intolerance and condescension. There would be opportunity to preach about how confusing Jesus was to his disciples, how they struggled to fully grasp the nature of his mission on earth. Return often to the story of his death and his resurrection, which Paul stated was “of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). Preachers can talk about his love for the Father and the kinds of things Jesus did to secure his heart, keeping it anchored in his relationship to his Father. There is simply no end to the things preachers can say about Jesus. All of these topics are very biblical and very postmodern at the same time.

Preaching about Jesus also allows preachers to sidestep another inherent resistant in the postmodern world, the authority figure of God. While a person might react negatively to the idea of a God telling them what to do, the example of Jesus is still intriguing, worthy of further investigation. A sermon can still arrive at the truth of who God is, but will do so by focusing on Jesus. It is what a missionary would do, shaping the form of their message to be heard by the people they are speaking to.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

Strengths and Weaknesses

Looking back on this project there are several observations to make. First of all, there is a need for an ongoing focus on homiletics. It has been 35 years since the researcher graduated from seminary and there have been nearly 100 denominational conferences he has been invited to attend. While there have been countless sessions on good theology and good leadership, the researcher cannot remember one session devoted to developing good homiletics. It seems to be assumed that a person learns everything they need to know about good homiletical practice in seminary. A strength of this project has been to study what goes into an effective sermon.

A second perceived value of this project was a review of the current values and thought processes of American culture. The normal journey of an individual is to go through their teens and twenties fully aware of the various cultures that they are surrounded by. Then, as a person moves into adulthood, they identify with a particular culture and get locked into a certain style. That person listens to the kinds of music they love, reads the kind of books they love' and they listen to the kinds of rhetoric they agree with. After all, there is little joy in listening to someone who speaks a dissenting view when a we have already made up our minds. This phenomenon is particularly true of those who are immersed in a religious culture. A value of this project to the researcher was to step back from his cultural preferences and to study culture in a wider perspective. It is important for each person to realize that their cultural preferences are only

preferences. Missionaries understand the importance of speaking to a culture instead of against a culture. American preachers need to embrace the same values.

The research conducted for this project held its own surprises along the way. It was assumed that the key component to this thesis would be the data received from recent visitors to Constance. The visitors to Constance, especially those who were coming from a minimal church background, were the desired respondents. It soon became evident that those visitors were not interested in filling out a survey. In retrospect, that should have been anticipated. On the other hand, the information received in the Palooza survey was much more valuable than anticipated. There is still more good information to be gleaned from the surveys, information that will be helpful in the attempts of Constance to better understand the community.

Finally, the interviews with the three preachers was more valuable and insightful than anticipated. The initial plan was to bring a structured set of questions to each interview for the sake of continuity. The thesis advisor encouraged a more organic approach. The researcher heeded this advice and came only with an opening question about their perception on the role of preaching in their congregation. Each interview proceeded on topics that were valued by each preacher and provided a depth that would not have otherwise been achieved.

Personal Journey

There are several vivid memories for the researcher as he looks back over his years of ministry. The first is back in 1982, sitting in the parking lot of a Jewel Food store after attending church on a Sunday afternoon. The sermon had been on Ephesians 2, a good-enough message that accurately centered on the grace of God. As the researcher and

his spouse were talking about the sermon, he told his wife how he would have approached the text. In verse 1, Paul begins by saying, “You were dead in your transgression,” and then proceeds to tell just how terribly dead a person is without Christ. In verse 5, Paul uses the exact phrase, “You were dead in your transgressions.” The structure of the text intensifies the lost state of humanity, which intensifies the role of God’s grace. After this observation, there was a prolonged silence in the car as my wife processed the information. Then she stated, “You need to finish your education as soon as possible and become a pastor so you can make those kinds of observations every Sunday.” For the researcher, it was one of the most important moments in grasping God’s call to ministry.

There have been many sermons preached over the 36+ years since that conversation. The researcher learned well in his time at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School that the preacher should always “keep his finger on the text.” He has continued to try to do just that. However, through the years there was a growing sense that the audience he preached to was changing. One of those changes had to do with the level of didactic structure desired. Through the years, an extensive outline was printed for the congregation with many places to “fill-in-the-blank.” There was extensive positive feedback to this approach...until about 2015. It was about this time when the researcher remembers fewer people wanted a sermon that had a didactic core and people were engaging better when there were less notes and a stronger sense of telling the story.

When the researcher began his journey into getting a doctorate of ministry, he did not originally plan on focusing on preaching. The position he was in at his church left him only preaching about five times a year and there were many other areas of study that

would be interesting and of benefit to his ministry. For the researcher, his compelling motivation to continue with schooling was not to advance a career, but to keep in a posture of learning. He had seen too many other pastors nearing 60, as he was, who had quit growing and had become rather cynical and critical. He wanted to finish better than that.

In 2017, there were several moments that defined the direction of this project. First of all, there were some structural changes at Constance, significantly increasing the number of times the researcher would be preaching. Secondly, the researcher ended up taking an independent study class with Dr. Rod Casey on homiletics. The class was very stimulating and encouraging. The themes discussed and studied resonated deeply and was one of the defining events in the journey toward this project.

A final defining event happened in the fall of 2017, when the researcher spoke at a retreat for senior adults at a Bible camp. What struck the researcher was how “easy” it was to speak to this crowd...primarily because they were the crowd he consistently spoke to over 30 years ago. It heightened the awareness of the researcher to all the little things that go into preaching that is tempting for a preacher to take for granted. Things like movie titles, where a classic like *Ben Hur* might be remembered by someone close to 60, but a person in their thirties has probably never seen or even heard of it.

For the researcher, he had no idea of how difficult it would be to reshape his preaching style into something that is more likely to connect with our current culture. It takes great diligence to speak in a way that fits the needs of today’s culture. In this way, he is greatly indebted to the doctoral process he has been part of over these past years. It

has kept him thinking, praying, learning, and growing to be effective in ministry at this point in his journey.

One of the benefits coming out of this project has been an even deeper appreciation for the stories of the Bible, viewing them from a more literary perspective as opposed to only an analytical perspective. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writers of the biblical books were genius in the way they developed themes and storylines. There are many places where the stories feel brand new, seeing aspects that were previously missed.

Future Research Possibilities

There were certainly many lines of inquiry that were beyond the scope of this study. One of those topics would be to further study biblical illiteracy and how to address it. A host of questions come to mind: While all of the Bible is profitable in the life of a believer, what passages and themes are most important? Since the Sunday sermon cannot be sufficient to build a foundation of biblical knowledge, how does this need fit into the programming of a church and specifically in discipleship programming? In a world that is increasingly stretched to the breaking point regarding time management, what are the best ways for people to grow in their understanding of God and the Bible? Are there ways to preach that would encourage self-study of the Bible as opposed to acting as if learning about God is complicated and can only be done by professionals?

Another line of inquiry would be to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of what church-going adults know. This research shows that people who attend church have more biblical knowledge than those who don't, but even those numbers seem lower than they should be. What do church attenders believe to be the central message of Noah or

Jonah? Might their answers reflect something taught in children's Sunday school, or is there more depth of understanding? Do adults have an understanding of "the gospel" and "the Great Commission"...or are these terms that just float around with minimal meaning? How should this be addressed?

There seems to be more work to be done in fully understanding the differences between oral communication and written communication and how we learn differently when using those genres. Preaching as is most commonly used is a strange combination in that the preacher prepares a message in the structure of written communication and then present their message through oral communication. It would seem there might be much lost in the switching of styles.

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