

Preaching the Gospel in an Awkward Age

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In *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion in a Post-Liberal Age*, (Westminster) George Lindbeck notes that North American Christians live in an awkward age. The age is awkward because, Christianity, having once been established in this culture is not yet clearly disestablished. Perhaps that explains why the majority of my sermons begin in Lindbeck's "experiential-expressivist" mode, beginning with the congregation's unformed and uninformed experiences and subjectivity, as if the old Constantinian synthesis were still in place, only to end as if I am a missionary speaking to pagans. Having begun in the recesses of human experience - are you depressed? Do you want self-esteem? How can we get the attention of Congress? - I end with the renewed realization that the gospel does not merely want to speak to the modern world, it wants to assault, confront, convert, remake that world through the church and its preaching.

As Lindbeck might put it, I begin, as all liberals do, as "experiential-expressivist," providing poetic articulation to what people already know, only to realize belatedly that the gospel is more "cultural-linguistic," demanding conversion into a new culture and a new mode of speaking and thinking which cannot be known without conversion. Most Sundays, in my neo-gothic, middle-of-the-university pulpit built in the heyday of North Carolina Constantinianism, speaking to a campus which is undeniably pagan not only in what is done in the dorms on Saturday night but more troublingly what is said in the classroom on Monday morning, I feel, well, *awkward*.

Missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin names the paganism to which I preach:

[Ours is not] as we once imagined a secular society. It is a pagan society, and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here surely is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.¹

I am troubled that most of our thought about contemporary homiletics appears not to engage this "most challenging missionary frontier of our time." Contemporary homiletics has busied itself with discussions of technique, image, narrative, and illustration with little attention to the baptismal, political question, *What sort of people is being formed through this preaching?* We assume that the role of the preacher is merely to evoke listeners' feelings that were already there, to answer questions which we already have with no appreciation for the formative, pushy, detoxifying quality of Christian speech. Alas, aesthetic skills replace the pastoral, political function of ecclesial speech. Inductive homiletic methods supplant forming a people whose accountability to scripture enables them to resist pagan accounts of how the world is put together.

The most interesting homiletical question today is the one raised by Newbigin:

What kind of churchmanship will enable us to preach the gospel that men and women are called to be disciples in the fullest sense.... How, in particular,

are we to do this, we who are sent not to one of the ancient world religions but to a society nourished in its deepest roots by a Christian tradition but governed in its explicit assumptions by a pagan ideology? And how can we be missionaries to this modern world, we who are ourselves part of this modern world?²

The questions posed by Newbigin produce awkwardness in those of us nurtured under the assumptions of Christendom. Here we are, beginning to feel like missionaries to the very culture we helped to create. We Methodists thought that we had helped produce a nation where it was now safe and relatively easy to be Christian. Like all other mainline Protestants, we fancied ourselves as Niebuhrian Christ-transforming-culture preachers. In fact, it was we who were transformed into those so skilled in speaking the language of the culture that we could no longer speak the gospel. In leaning over to speak to the modern world, we had fallen in.

For their part, Presbyterians are uncomfortable with talk of Christian particularity. Their strategy for adopting themselves to current political arrangements seems to be to devise a creation theology detached from Christology. They are thereby enabled to speak to something called "creation" in a way which implies that the world does not need redemption. Not much conversion is needed for "Justice-Love." Thus one Presbyterian reviewer of *Resident Aliens* said that, "The necessarily deep involvement of Christians in their time and culture is simply brushed aside with the authors' call to ecclesial purity ... such a retreat is a denial of God's steadfast love for the world and our ministry of reconciliation in it and for it."³ Who taught us to assume that deep involvement with the formation and fidelity of the church is a retreat from "deep involvement of Christians in their time and culture?" Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, implied that we had two political options: either be a transformationist cultural "all" or an irresponsible sectarian "nothing." *Resident Aliens* was not a call for a retreat from involvement. Of course, Christians are involved in the world. The question is not *if* we should be involved but *how*. One of the reasons why many preachers can call for a "deep involvement of Christians in their time and culture without feeling awkward is that the very forms the culture takes seem to mimic the reality of the church. When we try to critique our culture, it is somewhat like "trying to push a bus while we are sitting on it."⁴ In such a climate, concern with the church and its peculiar speech will be ridiculed as "retreat" and "denial of God's love for the world." From what I could see of American Christians' response to the recent Gulf War, our preaching has produced a church fully reconciled "in" and "for" the world. God grant us a few Presbyterians who are again more concerned with "ecclesial purity" than reconciliation with the powers that be.

A Different Way of Knowing

A rebirth of preaching is, as always, related to a renewed conviction of the peculiarity of the gospel. The gospel displays much more epistemological arrogance than we mainline, liberal Christians have assumed. Not content with the mere expression of experiences which are already available to everybody, the gospel demands training in perception, habits of the heart, repeated exposure to our master stories which make us into people we would not have been without hearing the good news which is Jesus Christ. As Paul says, faith comes from hearing. So does the church. The gospel is so fundamentally odd, there is no way to get it without it being told to you and therefore there is no salvation outside the church.

George Lindbeck rightly argued that we must reject the sort of “foundationalism” contained in the idea that Christian beliefs are somehow “expressions” of experiences entirely preceding those beliefs. Christian speakers must therefore reject Cartesian and Kantian interiority in favor of a mode of knowing and therefore speaking which is less universal, more explicitly confined to a particular perspective. John Calvin once spoke of scripture as the “lens” through which we Christians viewed the world. “For just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so, such is our feebleness, unless scripture guides us....”⁵

I now believe that this “lens” has nothing in common with those make believe fashion eyeglasses which are merely tinted glass with no lens refraction. The lens of scripture is a thick set of trifocals which causes one to trip down stairs and walk into closed doors until one becomes accustomed to looking at the world in a mode so peculiar.

Modern homiletics attempted to base preaching on feelings, affections, and personal experiences. Having lost the authority of scripture (Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority*), it sought a new universal on which to build a base for theology and preaching in which the church and its texts would be incidental to preaching. This epistemology of the experiential and the personal violated the odd nature of Christian thought. Christianity plays a distinctive “language game” which involves a whole set of habits, practices, and vocabulary which have few epistemological allies in the world.

I believe it was this epistemological arrogance of the gospel which Albert Schweitzer was pointing to toward the end of his *Quest for the Historical Jesus* when he noted that, “it is a good thing that the true historical Jesus should overthrow the modern Jesus, should rise up against the modern spirit and send upon earth, not peace, but a sword. He was not a teacher, not a casuist; he was an imperious ruler.”⁶

Biblical stories are not merely situated within the known world, poetically uncovering what is already innately available to everyone. Our master stories have a much more imperialistic and subverting function. They want to situate the present world within themselves so that a new world is offered and made available to the congregation.⁷

These stories are privileged by faith to be the key to interpreting all other stories. We need preachers who, by their faithful speaking, are used by God to evoke congregations who read the story of George Bush and Desert Storm through Psalm 2 rather than the other way around. Scripture makes the rather extravagant claim to be able to read, to criticize, and to say what is going on in the world, an extravagance based upon the claim that God really has entered history in Jesus and his church. To attempt to discuss preaching without discussing the ecclesial, political, social function of our speech is to sidestep the most pressing question to be asked of preaching in this awkward age.

Awkward Implications

1. Most of the theology I received was in the translation mode. After all, I went to Yale. Here is the gospel. Now, transpose its speech into more acceptable modern language. Much of the transposition I learned in seminary, the language of existentialist philosophy, had become dated by Marxist philosophy by the time I got to my first parish, only to be dated by the language of self-esteem by the time I got to my

second. I now agree with Alisdair McIntyre that there is a kind of “intranslateability” of differing philosophical languages. The gospel is very difficult if not impossible to transpose into another philosophical system which is based upon something other than a crucified and then resurrected Jew. We have not named the God of Abraham, Sarah, Mary, and Jesus when we say “Ultimate Reality” anymore than we have named the Malvinas when we say “Falklands.”

Realizing the peculiarity and intranslateability of the gospel, preachers may have to spend more time in our sermons enculturating our congregations into the gospel’s distinctive speech. I am not suggesting that more sermonic space be occupied with tedious definitions or argumentation but rather, through story and illustration, the oddness of our speech be made explicit. Some of our listeners may think they already know what we mean when we say something like “child,” or “poor.” Their definitions will need correction and amplification through accounts of Jesus’ peculiar behavior and speech.

2. I agree with Walter Brueggemann when he said that preaching needs a new awareness that we speak among the baptized.⁸ Everyone here has either been baptized or (as far as we evangelists are concerned) is preparing for baptism. That means that all of us have gathered to participate in a distinctive mode of discourse, a peculiar language game of baptismal speech. So they need not be surprised to emerge from church muttering, “I’ve never heard anything like that before.” Linguistic shock is a widespread malady for Christians in a culture of lies. Nor need we preachers be troubled when our listeners respond to our sermons with occasional anger and dismay. Our response ought to be something like, “Don’t complain to me. You’re baptized, for heaven’s sake. *I* didn’t call you to be a disciple. If *I* were calling disciples, I could have done a better job than this church. You are called by Jesus. For some reason he thought you were courageous enough, creative enough to live by this word and be a disciple. Don’t complain to me when the word is tough!”

3. Preaching in awkward times must strive to be less inductive, less experiential and expressivist, more biblical, more trusting and confident in the power of the biblical word to name us. The Bible does not just want to speak to the modern world; it wants to recreate the modern world. A preacher’s first task is not to apply the biblical word but to speak it. I am not to worry about implications for the text before I worry about simply getting the text right. It is the job of all the baptized to live the text. It is the job of the one who is called to preach first to speak the text to those whose vocation is to live the text in the world. More preachers will find themselves spending more time in study, prayer, and preparation for preaching. The task of equipment of the saints (Ephesians 6) is becoming more demanding and difficult, the principalities and powers more subtle in their subversion of Christian speaking.

I agree with George R. Hunsberger’s call for a revision of the way we train preachers on the basis of a new awareness, “We cling to a vision of culture and church as one, but they have been separating. The break point is here. We are faced with the [Awkward] choice of straining to hold on to the illusion or admitting that things have changed and following God into new, uncharted waters.”⁹

Recently, a friend of mine (once a Methodist, now a Presbyterian) asked his pastor to join him on some sort of community committee to “be a representative of the church.” This is the reply he received from the pastor. “If the church needs a representative, *you* be the representative. I can’t possibly be on such committees. I’m your preacher. I have to work six days a week to get ready for you people on Sunday. Be on a committee! With the homiletical needs of this congregation? You should see

the text that I have for next Sunday!”

When preachers rediscover the absolute necessity of preaching as equipment of the saints who must witness in a pagan culture, new dignity will have been restored to the preaching task as well as to the baptismal mandate of all Christians.

4. Preaching which is adequate for the challenges of these awkward times will worry less about the interior struggles of individual believers, less about groping for some point of contact with the unformed subjectivity of the listeners, and concern itself much more with the question, “What sort of church is being produced through this preaching?”

As Newbigin says, the congregation is “the hermeneutic of the gospel,” the means God has chosen, for good or ill, to present the gospel to the world. The credibility of the gospel is more a political (congregational) problem than an intellectual one. As a Wesleyan, I have no use for Calvinist visible/invisible church speculation. Preaching either creates a visible, living, breathing people or it is highly suspect.¹⁰

Has our preaching degenerated into an aesthetic exercise designed to produce a twitch in those who have become numbed to both deep anguish or great joy? Is our preaching merely the artful reiteration of general platitudes already known by everyone before coming to church? If so, we need to worry. Such preaching is unworthy of the high adventure of being a Christian in this awkward time. Let them listen to Leo Bascaglia.

I wish my preaching were more capable of producing people like the young man who wrote to me during the Gulf War. He had been a student at Duke, though he never came to services in Duke Chapel because someone at Intervarsity told him I was “Soft of the Bible.” (These Duke students are smart!)

Through an odd set of circumstances, we became friends through letters after he graduated from Duke. He wrote me, during the war, “An evangelical Christian, how can I support this war? My evangelicalism has taught me that I have an obligation to spread the gospel into all the world. Christ died for everyone. I have been taught that just the mere speaking of the name of Jesus has the power to convert others to his name. My question: Why are we killing people who, in Christ, are my brothers and sisters and for whom I have a responsibility to witness? How will we ever convert the people of Iraq after we have killed their children? Where are the evangelical Christians who once believed so strongly in the power of the word, the efficacy of preaching, the importance of mission? Why did we not say, ‘George, give us more time. We can turn all of this around just by speaking the name of Jesus!’”

God give us more evangelicals.

I wish that my preaching had produced that young man, a young man so well formed in the story, that he was able to see the world clearly, to ask the right questions having heard the true answer, having looked through the lens by which all is rightly focused. These awkward times demand nothing less of our preaching.

NOTES

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmanns, 1986), 20.

² Newbigin, 133.

³ David Hester, *Religious Education* (Spring, 1991): 326.

⁴ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmanns), 95.

⁵ *Institutes*, I:14:1.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *Quest for Historical Jesus*, 3rd ed., trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 1954), 400.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Power, Providence and Personality: Biblical Insight Into Life and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 110ff.

⁸ Brueggemann, "Some Missing Prerequisites," *Journal for Preachers* 13 (Lent, 1990): 23-30.

⁹ George R. Hunsberger, "The Changing Face of Ministry: Christian Leadership for the Twenty-First Century," *Reformed Review* 44 (Spring 1991): 226.

¹⁰ Cf. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227ff.