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Preaching Technique

*The Ministry of the Word in a Wired World**

Jeffrey Peterson

The advent of “postmodernism” is a subject much discussed in academic circles today, and increasingly in ecclesiastical precincts as well.¹ On offer are a variety of definitions and historical analyses, along with perhaps exaggerated claims that the advent of postmodernism represents a fundamental reordering of human society and experience, an opportunity “to boldly go where no man has gone before”—or “where no one has gone,” in the more postmodern version of that remark.²

*I am indebted to Dean Smith, pulpit minister of the University Avenue Church of Christ, and to Maurice Weed, both of Austin, Texas, for comment on this essay.

¹For an essential Christian perspective on postmodernism see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); “Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23 (1993): 117–126. With respect to Churches of Christ, the advent of postmodernism has been heralded by Douglas A. Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken? Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (Abilene, TX: ACU, 1994), 101–107, 121–123. For important recent critiques of postmodernist epistemology, see Edward Polz, *Mind Regained* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1998) and John R. Searle, *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1998), and the comparison of these by Richard John Neuhaus, “Minding the Mind,” *First Things* 97 (November 1999) 77–82.

²The allusion is of course to the opening voice-over of the television series *Star Trek*; the term “man,” employed in the original 1960s voice-over was replaced by “one” when the program was revived in the late 1980s and early 90s. For a surprisingly insightful exploration of philosophical issues in *Star Trek* by an editor of the conservative Christian magazine *Cornerstone*—noting significant differences

One significant component of the set of transformations in human consciousness that are grouped under the postmodern banner is the pervasive influence of broadcast media. The technology that facilitates virtually instantaneous communication across vast distances has already wrought a transformation in the way we conceive of the world and our place in it, much of it for the better; in a world of digital telephones, electronic mail, and live news via satellite, the War of 1812 need never be fought again.

Not all the effects of this transformation are salutary, however; the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia is only possible in a world where heads of state can manipulate public opinion via CNN, pilots miles above the earth can site targets with lasers, and civilian audiences can be granted a nose-cone view of missile launches. Of special interest to the readers of this journal, the pervasiveness of communications media represents in some respects a challenge to the ministry of the word at the opening of the third millennium in which Christ has been invoked as Lord. In this essay we consider three such challenges that life in a wired world presents to those who would minister with integrity in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. These cautionary remarks are offered in the hope of facilitating a genuine engagement between the Gospel and contemporary culture.

What Were We Talking About?

Whatever the details of its intellectual ancestry, the post-modern world reached American living rooms midway through the 1980s, when the manufacturers of televisions began including with their sets a device known as a “remote control.” This device enabled TV viewers to change from one channel to another without leaving their seats, and it consequently disconcerted the advertisers who fund television programs. Before the remote control, inertia favored the advertiser. Since changing the channel required the investment of energy needed to rise from the couch or easy chair and manually adjust

between the original, “modern” series and its various post-modern offspring—see Mike Hertenstein, *The Double Vision of Star Trek: Half-Humans, Evil Twins, and Science Fiction* (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1998).

the channel selector, viewers tended to remain tuned to a single station—and so within earshot of its advertising—until some stimulus actively moved them to another station. The remote control significantly lowered the threshold at which viewer disinterest leads to channel switching and left advertisers scrambling to retain viewers long enough for a spot to penetrate their consciousness.³ Coinciding with the rise of the remote control was the quick-cutting style of video editing pioneered on MTV and now ubiquitous on television.⁴ Not far behind came the World Wide Web, with instantaneous links between vast disparate collections of information, much of it untrustworthy.

These are not only interesting, perhaps even amusing, matters of cultural trivia. They also represent a challenge to those who would speak in the name of Christ to the first remote-control generation, to all of us now afflicted, as it were, with AADD—Adult Attention Deficit Disorder. Those who keep nightly vigil surfing channels (and now the Internet) are, after all, the same men and women who file into churches on Sunday morning to hear the Gospel proclaimed; those charged with preaching to these postmoderns face the challenge of attracting and retaining attention as surely as advertisers do. It naturally seems appropriate to address them in the modes to which they are accustomed from television viewing, which accounts for a greater

³Frank Greve (Knight Ridder Newspapers), “The quick TV clicker empowers the fickle,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 12 August 1999, A1, A9.

⁴The “new video” is analyzed and largely celebrated by Mitchell Stephens, *the rise of the image the fall of the word [sic]* (; New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), esp. 204–230. Stephens argues that quick cutting permits “information” to be communicated at greater velocity than through the medium of print, since video images can be rapidly juxtaposed in the viewer’s consciousness; while expressing some nostalgia for print, he does not clearly consider the difference between information and understanding, or the advantages of print as an agent of the latter. A more cautionary assessment of the shaping of human consciousness by manufactured images is offered by Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1994) 186–190.

proportion of most Americans' day than family conversation. The sound bite, then, would seem the privileged medium of address, and Jay Leno might well seem the model for pulpit ministry in the twenty-first century.

It may be wondered, however, whether the sound bite is an adequate vessel for the Gospel. The telling of the Gospel in the New Testament took the form of a story—even in the ministry of Paul, who often alludes to the story he had told his converts, the story his letters nowhere fully narrate.⁵ Nor is this simply an accidental debt that the earliest Christian literature owed to a story-loving ancient culture, a narrative husk that, once liberated from Aristotle's *passé* linear logic, we can exchange for isolated aphorism.⁶ The Christian faith invests its hearers' lives with meaning by plotting us on a narrative comprehending all creatures and all history, beginning "in the beginning" and concluding with the descent of the new Jerusalem from the heavens.⁷ Only those willing to be shaped by this narrative can truly experience the transformation wrought by the Creator, and only ministers who give attention to proclaim this narrative of events can hope to convert their hearers to the Gospel rather than to some lesser proclamation.

Coarsening the Kerygma?

Another matter for concern in the area under discussion is the accelerating coarseness evident in all forms of broadcast media and film. It may seem nostalgic to recall that throughout Lucille Ball's pregnancy, her delicate condition was never so termed out of respect for the audience's sensibilities, or that Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore occupied separate beds as

⁵See Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars, 1983).

⁶It may be accidental that those New Testament scholars who have recently sought to de-emphasize the canonical narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection have exhibited a marked interest in aphorism as the decisive expression of Jesus' significance (e.g., John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* [San Francisco et al.: Harper and Row, 1983]); but then again, it may not.

⁷See Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1993) 189–210.

Rob and Laura Petrie. Yet the quaintness of such depictions, combined with constant exposure to current programming, may blind us to the fact that standards of decency have dropped markedly within the past decade.⁸ The *Ally McBeal*-ization of broadcast programming proceeds apace, and casual sex serves today's television characters as bridge did a generation past.

One indicator of the decline of standards is the campaign recently launched by Steve Allen, Johnny Carson's predecessor on the *Tonight Show* and author of several books. Allen is far from reactionary and in his politics is recognizable as a citizen of Hollywood, perhaps better read than most. Yet Allen has recently been featured in full-page advertisements for the Parents Television Council, asking,

Are you as disgusted as I am at the filth, vulgarity, sex and violence TV is sending into our homes? Are you fed up with steamy unmarried sex situations, filthy jokes, perversion, vulgarity, foul language, violence, killings, etc.? Are you as outraged as I am at how TV is undermining the morals of children . . . encouraging them to have premarital sex?⁹

Faced with the task of communicating the Gospel to people formed in this environment, the temptations facing ministers of the Gospel resemble those before the managers of television newsrooms. The latter inherit a code of journalistic ethics from their predecessors, and most retain at least an abstract concern for the betterment of those who view their work. On the other hand, their wares compete for attention in an increasingly competitive marketplace in which the lowest common denominator is the lure for the greatest audience, and so the sensational and the perverse vie for position on the network lineup.

Television news consultants have measured the level of viewer interest that characteristically attaches to various types of stories and produced the

⁸L. Brent Bozell III tirelessly catalogues instances in the television and movie reviews compiled on his Media Research Center's web site (www.mrc.org/columns/ent/welcome.html).

⁹Don Feder, *Jewish World Review*, 3 November 1999 (accessible at www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/feder.html).

following ranking.¹⁰

Very Strong—(1) Humor; (2) Sex.

Strong—(1) Human interest; (2) Entertainment; (3) Fires.

Above Average—(1) Science; (2) Disasters.

Average—(1) Environment; (2) Health; (3) Education; (4) Energy; (5) Obituaries; (6) Courts; (7) Sports; (8) Politics; (9) Ethnic news; (10) Weather.

Below Average—(1) Consumer; (2) Government; (3) Transportation; (4) Accidents; (5) Dissent; (6) Economics.

Weak—(1) Religion; (2) Labor.

Indeed, the minister compares unfavorably with the producer of television news, for his assigned topic is outmatched by every conceivable news lead except an AFL-CIO convention.

What is the preacher to do? If the consultants' index of "inherent viewer interest levels" is an absolute guide—if contemporary churchgoers are interested only in sex, humor, and fires—then it might seem worthwhile to invite the attractive comedienne Jenny McCarthy on a Sunday morning to demonstrate the flame-retardant properties of asbestos swimwear, perhaps decorated with religious artwork. Failing that, the advice of a disillusioned member to a young minister might seem worth trying out: "Nothing gets the attention of an audience like a good dirty joke."

The church that succumbs to the temptation—e.g., inviting non-Christians to a worship service through a newspaper advertisement announcing, THIS BLOOD'S FOR YOU!"—may succeed in attracting attention, but at the risk of abandoning the earnestness and holiness that are to mark believers in Christ. It takes a special measure of courage and humility to acknowledge that those who find a degree of worldliness reassuring in a sermon—much less in a church—may not be ready for the renunciation of the world that is the condition of inheriting the kingdom of God.

Demystifying the Christian Mystery

Perhaps the most subtle influence exerted by mass media on the character of

¹⁰John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage), 130–131.

preaching is the temptation to make the Gospel manageable, in much the same way that the broadcast media themselves picture human life as a succession of discrete problems, each admitting of a tidy solution. Gabriel Marcel famously suggested that human life is not merely a succession of problems, it is also a domain of mysteries.¹¹ The distinction can be well illustrated by considering a modern hospital.¹²

A hospital brims with problems inviting solution, as any viewer of *ER* or *Chicago Hope* knows: in this treatment room there is a gunshot wound, in that one a cerebral hemorrhage, in another a respiratory failure. For each of these medical emergencies there is an appropriate surgical or medical response; proper procedures administered in a timely fashion by a competent practitioner will solve the problem and preserve the patient's biological life.

But such problems—the bread and butter of medical dramas—aren't the only realities present in the operating room; there are mysteries present, too. On occasions when treatment fails, we confront the mystery of *death*—and the mystery of human *life*, too, for our death is simply the end point of the temporal arc that begins with our conception. In those situations when family and friends gather around the hospital bed for words and gestures of comfort or confession or farewell, we may encounter the further mystery of human *society*, of love and hate and enmity and reconciliation. And, when a patient whispers in the ear of a physician or a chaplain, "I'm afraid; I don't want to die," we glimpse the mystery of human *value*, the ultimate meaning of

¹¹Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (2 vols.; London: Harvill, 1950–51; reprinted, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). See the helpful expositions by Michael B. Foster, *Mystery and Philosophy* (London: SCM, 1957), esp. 18–28, and by Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948), 63–78.

¹²The hospital as illustrative of the distinction between problems and mysteries was suggested by remarks of Paul Riddle, family life minister of the University Avenue Church of Christ, in a chapel service of the Institute for Christian Studies, 4 November 1999.

human existence in the vast span of the universe. These are not problems, and they cannot be solved; but these realities fill hospitals as surely as conditions amenable to treatment—and this is to say nothing of the relations between members of the medical staff, where fidelity and betrayal are the stuff of every emergency-room drama, as of every human community.

When we look in on doctors at work, whether real or fictional, we are apt to confuse these mysteries with other conditions that go by the same name. If a patient suffers with a malady that defies diagnosis, or if an indicated treatment is found to be ineffective in relieving the patient's symptoms, the doctor may well exclaim in dismay, "This case is a mystery!" Such a "mystery," however, is really only a type of problem; if the patient were properly diagnosed, or if the mysterious malady could be identified, the doctors could proceed to administer the cure. But no medical breakthrough is even dreamt of to extend the life span many years beyond the biblical threescore and ten, and even should the 120 years of Genesis 6:3 become the norm in the twenty-first century, death will still stand before us as a mystery beyond which no imaging device will enable us to peer.

The way in which the challenges of living a fulfilling human life are routinely presented in broadcast media encourage the confusion of mysteries with problems. The "practical" segments of news programs and the infomercials—those portions of the broadcast day that relate most directly to the routine lives of viewers—predictably present a concrete, easily describable problem: unwanted pounds around the middle, bacteria rampant in the kitchen sink, the heartbreak of psoriasis. Deliverance from the problem, offered by a specially qualified expert or by a seemingly omniscient correspondent, typically takes the form of a recipe, a procedure that can be displayed on the screen in bulleted steps, and all of this neatly packaged to fit between advertisements.

The minister of the Gospel is tempted to enter into competition with the recipes for happiness and good fortune broadcast ceaselessly into our homes. We have been granted a recipe for human flourishing, have we not?

Who can gainsay that the book of Romans begins with the plight of humanity in chaps. 1–3 and then moves to the divinely proffered remedy? Are we not then justified in treating the Gospel as God’s recipe for health and well-being, and pitching it to audiences just as tooth polish is pitched?

It may be answered that the divinity is in the details; how the human plight is sketched, and how the Gospel is presented as the remedy for what ails us, are all-important. John Bowker has identified religion as that aspect of human culture that deals with limitations on human aspirations that are *intransigent*, limitations that are not merely a function of our social or historical context but that are built into the human creature and the world of which we are a part, such as death and evil.¹³ It is a matter of concern if, shaped more by mass media than by the Christian confession, we present the Gospel as the answer to something less than our ultimate need, and as requiring less than the commitment of ourselves entire if we are to realize its benefits. In such circumstances the Gospel is not proclaimed but merely peddled (cf. 2 Cor. 2:17), and the Christian mystery of redemption is demystified.

Withdrawal, Accommodation, or Engagement?

In relating to any cultural situation, the church faces options: it may withdraw from the world into a separatist enclave, it may accommodate its life-style and message to fit more neatly into the surrounding culture, or it may engage the culture with an alternative vision of the good human life in the name of Christ.¹⁴ There is little danger that the church at large will withdraw from the world shaped by communications technology, but the danger of accommodation is very real. If the church in the twenty-first century trims its message and its mores to accord with that of the dominant culture, it

¹³John Bowker, *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), esp. 14–16.

¹⁴For this analysis of the church’s options in evangelism I am indebted to Stanley G. Reid’s D.Min. thesis (Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, 1994), esp. 9–10.

would not be the first time; Franklin Littell has shown that the history of Christianity in America can largely be told in terms of the promulgation of techniques for mass evangelism combined with a relaxation of moral standards for membership.¹⁵

The church may offer a kerygma reduced to sound bites that appeal to the mundane concerns of a vulgarized populace, and may in this way be able to tally impressive numerical successes. Such religious infotainment, however effective, will be something less than a proclamation of the Lordship of Christ and a summons to his service. What will truly embody the Gospel of God is a people committed to answering the call of God in Jesus Christ, the call that leads upward (Phil. 3:14) by way of those things that are true, sober, just, pure, pleasant, commendable—the qualities that conduce to true human excellence (*aretē*) and ultimately to the praise of our Creator himself (Phil. 4:8).

¹⁵Franklin Hamlin Littell, *From State Church to Pluralism: A Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History* (2d ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1971), esp. 54–66, 90–98.

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