1

Preaching at the End of the World (as We Know It)

Whether you are reading various preaching and theological periodicals, church growth literature, journalistic magazines like the *Atlantic*, or almost anything else that comments on our contemporary culture, you've probably been struck by the degree to which all of them agree on at least one thing: our world is changing, and changing faster than at any period in recent history.

Depending on their audience, various authors and commentators may refer to these cultural shifts in different ways. Those in the church will speak of a post-Christian or post-Constantinian age. Others in business will refer to the post-industrialized world or the silicon age. Still others will indicate the distinctive character of emerging generations with labels such as GenX or the Millennial Generation. Whatever the terms employed, the shared conviction is that we live in an age of enormous societal and cultural change. And of all the various labels and handles people have tried out to capture these changes, probably the most frequent descriptor used in recent years is *postmodern*. While the term is now fairly commonplace, many church leaders and preachers—not to mention the cultural pundits themselves!—continue to grapple with what it actually means and what it implies for preaching.

For this reason, we begin our exploration of preaching at the crossroads—at the intersection, as we'll see—of modernist certainty and postmodern skepticism. Despite the suspicions, if not outright hostility, many Christian leaders harbor toward postmodernity, I believe it offers more opportunities than challenges. Indeed, I am convinced it offers preachers the best chance for offering a lively witness to, and gaining an engaged hearing of, the gospel that we've had in several centuries.

I offer the reasons for my confidence in the next three sections of this chapter. In the first, I will sketch the broad contours of the movement—what makes postmodernity actually *post*modern. In the second, I will address the

central challenge the movement poses Christian preachers: the nature of our access to truth. In the third, I will describe several elements of preaching affected by postmodern theory that may help us offer our witness to the gospel faithfully and effectively in this day and age. Finally, in a fourth section, I will conclude with a few thoughts—and, truth be told, exhortations—on the need for postmodern courage.

Putting the "Postmodern Age" in Perspective

Of the three elements of the cultural zeitgeist I have named, postmodernism is perhaps the broadest, most currently pervasive, and probably least understood of the movements we've set ourselves to face. For this reason, it often feels both omnipresent and indecipherable. Curiously, the chief difficulty in coming to grips with the nature and implications of postmodernity is its very name, which is as ungainly and confusing as any descriptive tag we've heard in recent years.

In particular, it's difficult for many of us to sort out what "postmodern" can mean when we regularly associate the word *modern* with whatever is most contemporary, current, or up-to-date. That is, how can something that exists now be "post-today"? But when cultural theorists, philosophers, and others employ the term *modern*, they refer not to whatever is most current but rather to a distinct historical era of the Western world.[1] For this reason, it will be helpful to consider briefly some of the characteristics of the modern age in order to appreciate what *post*modernity is seeking to move beyond.

Modernity in a Nutshell

Inaugurated in the middle of the seventeenth century in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War, the modern era represented a shift from grounding one's basic assumptions about the world and society largely on religious faith to doing so based solely on human reason. This shift had significant implications, as it dramatically affected the criteria the leading intellectuals of the day—and later the larger populace—used to determine what is true, reliable, and valid.

In the ancient world, the standards for legitimacy (that is, the means by which one validates what is undeniably true) were twofold: coherency and fidelity. Coherency means your theory had to make sense and not have any logical contradictions; fidelity means it could not contradict previously validated traditions. For instance, when the Protestant Reformers made their

1. It is important to note that both modernity and postmodernity are Western constructs. That is, they describe the intellectual history largely of Europe and North America and cannot easily be applied to other regions and cultures of the world.

case before the pope, emperor, and general populace, they consistently offered arguments that were logically sound and based on interpretations of Scripture and church tradition, suggesting that, far from doing anything new, their understanding of these ancient authorities was actually more accurate and more faithful than that of their opponents. Practitioners from across disciplines employed similar criteria.

After the devastating religious wars of the seventeenth century, however, intellectual and cultural leaders despaired of understanding and ordering the world and human society via a shared but disputed religious tradition. We should be clear, at this point, that by reaching this conclusion, the early modernists were *not* rejecting faith; most continued to be faithful members of the church. Rather, they were rejecting the use of religious dogma as an adequate foundation on which to base their theories about the nature of the world. The difficulty they immediately faced, however, is that one needs some kind of self-evident and indisputable foundation in order to develop indisputable criteria by which to arbitrate between competing truth claims in order to construct any reliable theories about the nature of the world.[2] For this reason, simply rejecting religious or dogmatic foundations was not enough; they had to seek out another, more reliable footing upon which to erect theories about the natural and social world. In this pursuit, they turned from faith to reason, shifting their attention from speculation about the Creator to earnest study of the creation.[3]

As a result, there soon emerged a single standard of legitimacy: rational verifiability. That is, the architects of modernity demanded that all conclusions about the observable world be reached through the careful application of human reason such that any other rational person employing similar means would reach the same conclusion. The promised reward of this methodology was knowledge about the world that was entirely objective and universally valid. The modernists pursued this goal with a passion, believing that the discovery and use of such knowledge would benefit all humanity.[4] This pursuit of knowledge, in turn, gave birth to the scientific method and the rise of the industrial, mechanical, medical, and technological revolutions that followed, all

2. See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 45–87.

3. In fact, it was the precisely their faith in an intelligent and benevolent Creator that greatly spurred the early modernists' attempts to understand and harness a creation that reflected both the goodness and rationality of its Creator. On this, see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 23–34.

4. Ibid., 5.

of which are based on the premise that one can trust only those conclusions that can be studied, replicated, and thereby verified by agreed-upon standards of human rationality.

After a brief though distinct period of anxiety (after all, it's not easy to abandon one's basic view of how to make sense of the world), the modern era came to be dominated by a pervasive optimism that through the diligent application of reason, humans could solve most of the world's problems. And indeed—as witnessed by the development of modern medicine, which has limited the impact of many previously deadly diseases, and the advent of modern farming, which has greatly increased food production, to cite just two examples—the confidence, energy, and ingenuity of modern thinkers has produced dramatic benefits.

By the late twentieth century, however, more and more persons came to believe that, whatever its benefits, the modern view of the world has also exacted tremendous costs. To name only a few of the "disappointments" of the modern age, poverty has not been eradicated, wars have not ceased, in the place of old diseases we have new and deadlier ones (and some of the old ones are reappearing more virulent than ever), and after three centuries of harvesting the world's resources to meet the demands of technological advancement, our world stands on the brink of environmental disaster. In light of all this, modernist confidence has waned, if not been extinguished, and there has arisen in its place a distinct skepticism about claims of the sufficiency of human reason to solve all problems and meet every need.

The Postmodern Reaction

It is this skepticism, in fact, that marks the current age as *post*modern. Postmodernists seek to move beyond what they believe was the naive, self-serving, and ultimately destructive optimism of modernity. In particular, postmodernists dispute the claim that there are neutral, self-evident, and universal foundations one can appeal to for determining what is true. Rather, they contend that all our theories—as well as the way in which such theories are implemented in the sphere of human relations—are influenced by preconceptions we hold based on our race, gender, nationality, religion, economic status, previous experience, and other factors that even the most exacting methods cannot entirely rule out.

In short, according to postmodern critics, there is no rational foundation that guarantees absolute objectivity or neutrality. To put it another way, there is no "God's-eye view" that allows us to view all sides of any particular issue with absolute impartiality. Ultimately, they contend, there is no way to get around

the phenomenon that we see what we see and believe what we believe in part because of where we are standing at the time. Hence, postmodernists are aptly described as "antifoundational," rejecting any neutral, objective, and ultimate court of appeal by which to adjudicate between competing truth claims.

In contrast to the modernist quest for self-evident foundations and timeless truth, therefore, postmodernists argue that whatever theories we may propound about the nature of the world—that is, about Reality and Truth—remain just that: theories, or even constructions, about reality that are rife with our own unacknowledged biases and remain, ultimately, to be made up as much by convictions and beliefs as they are by evidence. The chief impulse and duty of the postmodern critic, then, is not merely to point out the unquestioned beliefs that lie quietly beneath our various worldviews, but also to draw such unacknowledged convictions out into the open for public scrutiny and evaluation.

Further, postmodernists are eager to point out the degree of hostility and even violence directed at those who dare question such constructions of reality and thereby challenge the status quo. The history of the Western world, they argue, is one long, distressing story of the consistent quelling, if not outright quashing, of dissident voices that refuse to conform to the order established by those in power. From Galileo and Copernicus to Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King Jr., those who call into question the culture's basic sense of what is undeniably true—whether in the world of science, politics, religion, or social relations—inevitably risk their reputations and even their very lives. A secondary impulse of postmodernists is therefore to resist the modernist desire for uniformity and conformity that has all too often been achieved through the use of force.

What we soon come to realize, then, is that the term *postmodern* does not designate a particular discipline or isolated movement so much as it describes a more general attitude of unrelenting skepticism pervading a number of disciplines concerning the validity of previously held assumptions about the nature, and even existence, of objective truth.

Postmodern Convictions

The extent of the gap between modernist certainty and postmodern skepticism becomes clear when we examine the distinct shifts in perspective regarding the nature of reality, truth, language, and power. Indeed, examining these contested elements outlines what we might regard as widely held postmodern convictions.

First, whereas modernists seek to describe reality, postmodernists deny the existence of a singular reality, speaking instead of the various competing "metanarratives" or "standard stories," one of which we unconsciously adopt and unquestioningly take as our reality. Only when confronted with an alternative do we become aware of the parameters of our own cultural-linguistic worldview, and then usually only long enough to dispute and oppose the alternative vision.

Second, while modernists searched for ultimate truth, postmodernists argue that what we call "truth" is simply the name we attach to those values the dominant culture has tacitly agreed upon. Truth, according to the postmodernist, is a social construct. After all, what any given culture has posited as undeniably, even self-evidently true has changed from generation to generation; what remains constant is the need to affirm one's present values as the one and only Truth.

Third, while modernists view language as entirely descriptive, a neutral tool by which to describe Reality, postmodernists see language (and culture) as inherently productive, the raw material from which we fashion our worldview. This is why the names we use to describe those who are different from us are so important. The language we employ—positive or negative, affirming or pejorative—simultaneously creates and limits our capacity to experience those persons.

Finally, while modernists believe that one attains power by aligning oneself with reality (hence Francis Bacon's "knowledge is power"), postmodernists assert that it is actually those who wield power in the culture who get to name what counts for knowledge and therefore to determine what is legitimate, true, and real. For this reason, Michel Foucault reversed Bacon's dictum and declared instead that "power is knowledge."[5]

While this clash of ideas and worldviews has raged for several decades in academic institutions, by the turn of the millennium it had seeped deeply into the popular culture. Films like *Pulp Fiction*, *The Matrix*, and *Fight Club* near the turn of the millennium, and *Inception*, *The Tree of Life*, and *Life of Pi* more recently, all portray postmodern skepticism and values not simply as the

5. Foucault's conception of the relationship between power and knowledge is complex and evolved throughout his career, but the following statement is fairly representative of his unique contribution: "We should admit that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power, or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), 27.

norm but as desirable for navigating a world where you cannot trust what is presented as real. Similarly, television shows like *Lost*, *Mad Men*, and numerous "reality" television programs play with our sense of reality, trace the antecedents of our preference for image over substance, and even invite the question of whether there is anything more than image in the first place. Throughout, these and other art forms acknowledge the deep distrust of received values and traditions that was percolating in our culture during the second half of the twentieth century and now has boiled over, calling into question any singular, comprehensive view of truth and reality.

In light of all these philosophical and cultural shifts, it is little wonder that so many find themselves confused, worried, and even threatened. In the postmodern world, it can feel as if just about everything we once cherished as true is now up for grabs, if not actually under assault. Indeed, the relentless onslaught of postmodern skepticism quickly provokes the question "Is *anything* true?" The answer we give to that question will have significant implications for our preaching in a postmodern age.

Telling the Truth in a Postmodern World

Although the challenges postmodernism offers Christian preachers and theologians are many, most can by grouped together under the overarching charge that postmodernism denies there is any universal Truth available to us. If truth, like beauty, is entirely in the eye of the beholder, and if we would therefore be better to abandon the word altogether in favor of less ambitious ones like *value* or *meaning*, then those of us charged with proclaiming the gospel—a message we believe is true in all times and places—find ourselves rendered nearly mute.

Or do we? A more careful read of the postmodern critique of modernity reveals that postmodernists are not so much against truth in and of itself as they are against claims and assertions of *self-evident* truth. Once you declare something self-evident, you immediately place it beyond the pale of critical review and privilege it above all other assertions. Such a move is inherently a power play, as it gives one voice all the power in the conversation and greatly restricts the freedom of anyone else to even question the assertion.

Postmodernists not only resist this move, however; they also ask whether it is necessary in the first place. Modernity, they contend, was built upon the false premise that in order to make sense of the world, you need an absolute bedrock foundation upon which to build your theories. Only if you begin with something immune to the tumults of changing religious beliefs or shifting

philosophical convictions, modernists believed, can you build anything that will last.

Postmodernists respond by suggesting that perhaps our foundations do not need to be quite so rigid or permanent in order for us to build with confidence. As evidence, they point to the number of times modernist foundations have changed. Whether it was notions of the superiority of one race, gender, or religious tradition over another or a particular theory about the structure of the physical world, when the reigning foundational assumption was challenged or proved to be inadequate, it was merely revised or replaced, and the world did not end.[6] Rather, we modernists simply revised our views, incorporated the new data, and kept on building our comprehensive theories about the nature of reality. While some revisions—particularly those regarding our notions of social equality—were more tumultuous than others, none has yet proved fatal.

Certainly, we in the church—who have over the centuries weathered controversies over issues as far-ranging as slavery, the ordination of women, the proper observance of the Sabbath, the appropriate Christian response to war, and human sexuality, just to name a few—can appreciate that it is possible to change, adapt, and even reverse one's previous beliefs and still remain intact.[7] The change is sometimes difficult, occurs over great lengths of time, and creates rifts among believers. Nevertheless, the church has consistently weathered and even flourished amid significant change. Ironically, though we acknowledge that many of the controversies of previous ages seem now at the very least to be settled and at times even to be a bit embarrassing, we have difficulty viewing our present struggles with similar good humor or the confidence that we will survive this tumult as well. Why?

Postmodernists would suggest it is because ultimate foundations bolster our sense that the world is an ordered, stable, sensible environment and thereby provide social stability, something we often unconsciously prize even above fidelity. The difficulty with posing ultimate foundations, however, is that we can become so invested in defending these for the sake of preserving stability and order that we not only ignore the fact that we cannot prevent social, cultural, and intellectual tumults but also lose sight of the edifice we are constructing in the first place. Postmodern thought suggests that, rather than build permanent and rigid foundations, we instead learn from architects in the

6. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), esp. 278–79.

7. For an excellent set of case studies of such controversies, see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1983).

San Francisco Bay area who have discovered that buildings with more flexible foundations are more likely to survive seismic tremors.

The postmodern proposal therefore is not that we abandon philosophical foundations altogether, but that we offer them as penultimate, rather than ultimate, conclusions. In other words, though we believe our foundations to be true, we are open to the possibility that they may need to be revised in light of new data, experience, or more plausible alternatives. Adopting more flexible, penultimate foundations grants the possibility of future adaptation while preserving enough stable ground upon which to build useful theories about the nature of our world.

As an example, we might point to that quintessential of modern disciplines, mathematics, noting that at the heart of every mathematical proof are axioms, unproven—indeed, unprovable—assertions. Yet mathematicians are not paralyzed until their axioms are proven eternally valid; rather, they act *as if* they are true and build their various theorems, pausing to reconsider their work only at those points where their axiomatic assumptions are called into question by emerging data. When challenged by another theorist, a mathematician would, of course, defend his or her conclusions and demand good logic and an abundance of evidence. But no mathematician would deny the right of another to call into question either the theorem or the axiom upon which it stands. To do so would lose the benefit of constructive critique that might ultimately improve the theory in question. In a similar way, postmodernists invite us to take the same approach to our various philosophical and theological foundations, refusing to place them beyond critical review, revision, and even reversal, hoping in this way not only to end the spiral of violence modernity sponsored but also to increase the utility—dare we say truthfulness?—of the theories we offer.

This discussion sheds considerable light on our questions about truth. For if there is some merit to the postmodern argument, then we are not forced to *abandon* truth but only to reconsider how we understand it. In particular, we need to perceive that, ultimately, truth is a matter less of final proof than of faithful confession.[8] Our task as Christian theologians and preachers is not to *prove* the faith claims we make (ever the modernist penchant) but instead to witness to the truth we perceive. Of course, we marshal the most compelling evidence and make clear the good reasons for our belief, yet we never assume we have proved it once and for all.

8. I take up the subject of "confession" in far greater depth in *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

This shift from proof to confession, witness, and testimony aligns closely with the biblical witness and much of the church's history. As Christians, we are called, after all, to live as we have been saved, by "faith alone" (Rom. 3:23–28; Eph. 2:8–9), and faith, according to the biblical witness, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Further, opting for faithful confession over rational proof opens up new vistas for meaningful dialogue with those who do not share our religious convictions. For when one adopts unrelentingly the language of proof, then anyone who disagrees is immediately an opponent, as proof sees any challenge as a threat. For example, if I am bent on proving that Abraham Lincoln is the greatest U.S. president and you disagree, then my proof is not complete until you either change your mind or I discount your opinion as somehow faulty or unworthy. The legitimacy of proof, to put it another way, rests in its reception, and as long as anyone disagrees with what we are trying to prove, the truth of our assertion is at risk.

Confession, however, operates differently. Its validity rests with the integrity of the confession itself. Consider the following example. When you confess that you love someone (particularly for the first time), you are naturally quite invested in the response of your beloved. Yet whether that response is positive or negative, the integrity of your confession is never in doubt. The integrity—indeed, the validity and legitimacy—of confession rests not with the receiver but with the confessor. Further, even if your beloved has rejected your love, he or she does not suddenly become your opponent. In fact, if that were the case, most of us would be highly suspicious of the quality and caliber of the love professed in the first place. And to return to the earlier illustration, if I shift my desire from proving Lincoln's greatness to confessing it and even defending it, then disagreement is no longer threatening. Now the validity of my assertion rests on the integrity with which I've made it, not on its being universally accepted. In fact, disagreement might even be productive, helping me understand the subject at hand more deeply through our conversation and thereby enabling me to offer a more compelling confession at some later point.

Something analogous is happening when it comes to religious truth. We can confess the truths we believe, give good reasons for them, and yet allow others to disagree, trusting that the most important thing about our claims is not their acceptance by everyone else but rather the integrity of our confession. At this point, however, let me be clear: this does not mean we do not really believe what we say we believe. Rather, it means we will not coerce agreement or belief from others in order to preserve our confidence that what we believe has been proven once and for all and therefore is worthy of our faith. Our job is to testify; it is up to God to make that testimony potent.

In this refusal to take the "power road" of rational proof, we echo the work of God in Jesus Christ on the cross, taking the path of weakness and trusting in ultimate vindication (see Phil. 2:6–11). Further, we perceive an inescapably eschatological element to our notions of truth, as we recognize that Jesus and the ultimate truth he represents and embodies always stand just beyond our reach, moving toward us and beckoning us forward but refusing to be held captive by any particular age, tradition, or believer (see 1 Cor. 13:12). Truth, as it turns out, can be *confessed* and *professed* but never *possessed*. And while this kind of truth may appear a little more ragged and frayed at the edges than the idea of truth that prevailed in the modern age, that may make it all the more compelling.[9]

As a result of this shift from groping after rational proof to seeking to make faithful confessions, Christian preaching becomes a matter of giving public voice to the confessions, convictions, and beliefs of the Christian tradition about what is ultimately and universally true in response to immediate circumstances, all the while never forgetting that these are and remain confessions. The empty tomb, we should keep in mind, in and of itself meant nothing. Rather, what matters was and is the central Easter proclamation that "Christ is risen," a confession of faith that many then and now disputed and disbelieved, yet some believed and, believing, found life in Christ's name. Christian preachers, then, are called to offer their confessions of the truth as clearly, compellingly, and winsomely as possible, confident of their witness yet open to the disagreement and disbelief of others. The responsibility for conversion, from this point of view, rests squarely on the shoulders of the Holy Spirit; the preacher is called only to confess. If we can envision and take up preaching as a practice of confessing, rather than attempting to prove, truth, we will very quickly realize it is a calling that demands equal measures of courage, creativity, and humility. It is a calling that is worthy of all that we have and are.

Telling the Old, Old Story in a New Day

Having sought to describe the essential character of preaching in a postmodern age as confessing the truth of Jesus Christ, we can now move to consider three concrete implications. The first stems from postmodern convictions about the narrative or storied quality of reality: that we all live in, by, and out of some grand narrative that helps us explain everything else (postmodernists also call this a metanarrative or standard story). That is, we make sense of our concrete

9. See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), esp. 158–64.

experiences in the world by fitting those experiences into some larger story about the way the world really is. In the modern era, we simply called our narrative "reality," but now we are more keenly aware that different people have very different narratives explaining the world. Some are rooted in religious traditions, and others are secular; some have primarily nationalistic identities, others ethnic. Similarly, we have also realized that there is no objective, neutral court in which to adjudicate which of those multiple narrative constructions is indisputably true. The presence of these differing narratives and our inability to prove rationally the validity of one over all the others has led some postmodern theorists to call for an end to metanarratives. It would be more accurate, however, to say we live in an age of competing metanarratives, of which the Christian story is only one.[10]

In light of this conviction and situation, it is crucial to recognize that in addition to whatever other responsibilities they may have, Christian leaders are, first and foremost, entrusted with telling the Christian story. In this light, we need to reclaim the role of pastoral leaders as "stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1) in that sense that we are charged with telling the sacred story as vividly and clearly as possible in order to render the Christian narrative as a three-dimensional worldview that seems a viable alternative to our people in light of the other stories, both religious and secular, that they are regularly exposed to.

What response, for example, does the Christian story make to the hyper-consumerism of our culture? From this broad question stems a host of more particular ones: Does Christ's cross and resurrection offer a vision of "abundant life" (John 10:10) that can compete with the "life of abundance" our culture promises is available only through buying and having and owning and consuming ever more? Can families that are harried and hassled by the stresses of work, commuting, and their children's packed schedules to the point of coming apart at the seams expect anything different from the Christian community? In light of the level of poverty in the world and our own nation, can the church offer a different vision than the winner-take-all, survival-of-the-fittest mentality of the marketplace? Does Christ's death and resurrection have anything compelling to say about the meaning of our lives, our work, our relationships, our world, or our future? Does the new life in the Christian community that baptism ushers believers into look and feel any different than

10. On the failure of metanarratives, see Jean-François Lyotard's influential work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37–41. For a compelling response, see Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 712.

the competitive rat race so many are caught up in? Joined to Christ's body of believers, what responsibility do we have to those in need?

These are the kinds of questions congregational leaders should be asking and answering—in a variety of venues, but certainly also in and through their sermons—in order to give their hearers the imagination to enter into the biblical narrative and worldview so they might see what life looks like when lived from within the Christian story.

Once again, the Bible intuitively invites us into this task. The obvious but I think incredible thing about the Christian Bible is that it begins at the very beginning in Genesis and ends only at the very end in Revelation, inviting all of us who read and hear it today to imagine ourselves living somewhere between Acts and Revelation. The sermon becomes a primary place where the preacher presents, describes, and explains the Christian story vividly enough that readers can imagine taking their place in that narrative and seeing themselves not only as linked to all the believers who came before them but also as characters in God's ongoing drama to love, bless, and save the world.

A second element of preaching potentially helped by postmodern thought is our view of Scripture and our sense of the power of words. Modernists, you will recall, viewed language as essentially descriptive, the neutral tool by which we describe reality. Postmodernists, in contrast, believe language to be both potent and productive, actually creating and shaping reality rather than merely describing it. In short, words are powerful because they provoke feelings and emotions and actually create the narrative frameworks within which we make sense of the world.

This sense of the productive power of words helps us to reimagine the Bible not primarily as a static repository of religious information about the Christian life but rather as itself a collection of living and active faith claims and assertions about what God has been—and is still!—up to in the world. The Bible, that is, is a collection of confessions that seek a response from whoever reads or hears it. John admits as much at the formal conclusion to his Gospel: "Jesus said and did many other signs that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). In this brief but telling passage, John reveals not only that he is making creative, authorial decisions in composing his witness ("Jesus did many other signs that are not written in this book; but these are written"), but he also tells us why: "so that you may believe." John, in other words, is after our faith. He offers his confession in order to prompt us to believe the Christian story so we might have life in Christ's name.[11]

All of Scripture is the same; it was not written primarily as a historical document nor as instruction in the religious life, but rather was written by persons who were so gripped by their experience of God's activity in their lives and the world that they had to testify to what they believed God was and is doing in the world. If we can imagine Scripture as this kind of living and active word—indeed, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow [and] able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12)—then we will be greatly assisted in giving voice to these powerful and provocative confessions in our preaching. Our task is therefore not simply to discover what the passage meant in some historical sense only, nor are we satisfied merely with wondering what Scripture might teach us. Rather, we are looking for what kind of claim the passage of Scripture before us is making on us and our hearers—in other words, what kind of demand, promise, or pledge it contains that will affect our living here and now as we struggle to be the people of God living in mission to and for God's world.

Preaching, then, is a matter of hearing the claims and confessions of Scripture and making them again in our day and age so they can address and affect our hearers with the good news of what God has done and is still doing for us and all the world in and through Jesus the Christ. The words of Scripture, from this postmodern perspective, are less like lead, an inert metal we can work over and shape, than like uranium—alive and pulsing and able to transform whatever is around it. Our job is to open up these powerful words and see what happens.

A third area for our consideration stems from the skepticism postmodernists (and here not just philosophers but also many of our younger members) direct toward received tradition. It's not that postmodernists assume everything handed down to us is wrong; it's more that they balk at being expected to believe it just because, quite frankly, some dead white guy said it was true a hundred, or five hundred, or two thousand years ago. Traditions—whether they are religious, philosophical, or cultural—were conditioned by their particular time and place and corroded by the self-interest of those who originated and now maintain them, so they cannot be trusted for their own sake. Rather, truth must be continually revalidated through experience.

11. Luke makes a similar confession in the opening of his book, where he relates not only that he was not an eyewitness and is therefore dependent on other witnesses but also that he is working with a variety of confessions in order to render one that makes sense ("an orderly account") in order that Theophilus may be confident, or certain, of that in which he has been instructed (Luke 1:14).

This does not mean that one's immediate experience is the only valid standard in some kind of postmodern exercise in narcissism. Rather, it means that for tradition to have validity, it must in some way touch, shape, and fit into our experience. Postmodern hearers, that is, won't simply believe something is true because you say it; rather, they will believe it is true when you say it in a way that rings true to some element of their own experience. In fact, at their best, postmodern hearers, because of their embrace of skepticism, may be willing to have their own beliefs, preconceptions, and convictions challenged by the preacher's words—but only if the preacher first tries to relate his or her message to the actual realities and experiences of the hearer.

This helps illumine the role of theological doctrine in preaching. Too often in the modern pulpit, doctrine was offered as information to be learned, one more thing people had to know and believe (in the sense of cognitive assent) in order to be a Christian. In a postmodern pulpit, doctrine serves to make sense of the hearer's experience. The preacher, therefore, doesn't simply explicate some ancient doctrine and then sit back and wait for the hearer to assent to it. Rather, the preacher, taking the hearer's experience of life in this world seriously, proposes Christian doctrine as a way of making sense of that experience, of offering a larger framework in which to understand and navigate the variety of events in our life in this world.

From this perspective, for instance, one does not preach the incarnation expecting twenty-first-century hearers simply to memorize and assent to fourth-century formulations of the twofold nature of Christ as we find them in the Nicene Creed. Rather, preachers offer the incarnation as a promise and confession that God in Christ has been joined to humanity; that God in Christ therefore knows fully what it means to be one of us; that God in Christ has become completely accessible to us and has drawn near to us; that God in Christ has taken on our lot and our lives that we may be joined through Christ to God and thereby have hope in light of our mortality. The doctrine of the incarnation, ultimately, is not about philosophical or theological formulations but is about what it means to be a human in need of forgiveness and healing, wholeness and salvation, and the lengths and depths to which God will go to bring those to us.

If the Christian faith is, among other things, a grand narrative or worldview that attempts to make sense of all of our lives, then theological doctrines are the signposts and markers along the narrative route. Historically, Christian doctrine was initially proposed and formulated as a means of making sense of the varied experiences Christian communities had of life in Christ as they wrestled with Scripture and with living in the world together. In this sense,

doctrine was originally an attempt to order the reflections of Christians on their actual experience of living simultaneously in the world and in Christ. But somewhere along the way, doctrine came to exist for its own sake, demanding to be believed not because of how it informed our actual living and dying but because it had been handed down from church authorities. Such conceptions of doctrine will no longer hold. For those willing to sacrifice a bit of that kind of authority, however, doctrine has the potential, once again, to speak a potent and compelling word that takes our experiences seriously, that makes sense of our lives in the world, and that draws us into life in Christ and community together.

Moving Forward with Postmodern Courage

At the outset of this chapter, I argued that the postmodern age holds more opportunities than threats for those Christians willing to take its claims seriously. In light of the discussion thus far, and as a conclusion to these reflections, let me sum up that confidence in a single sentence: perhaps postmodernity can best be understood as the death of modernist optimism that we can save ourselves.

Modernity, after all, sought to establish the entirely rational, humanistic means by which to understand and harness the structures of nature and the universe in order to subdue these things so as to solve all problems, right all wrongs, and usher in a new era of universal well-being. At the dawn of a new century, we must confess that whatever gains the modern era has brought, there have been tremendous, even globe-threatening failures. The human condition, whatever our technological advances, remains largely unchanged, and we are as wonderful and flawed, hopeful and despairing a creation as ever.

It is my sense and conviction that in the wake left from the death of modernist optimism there has opened up again an appreciation and even appetite for mystery, an openness to the divine, and an awareness that we cannot save ourselves but stand in need of mercy, forgiveness, and grace. In this day and age, we have inordinate numbers of people searching for something more meaningful and of greater depth than what they have been offered by the culture at large.

Seasoned by their experience with life's failures and disappointments, however, today's hearers yearn for something other than more optimism and definitely not for more certainty. Rather, what they long for, I believe, is courage. The kind of courage that does not have to insist on being right but rather is willing to risk its confession and make its wager about God's commitment to this world and then see what happens. The kind of courage that

is not paralyzed by a lack of certainty but is willing to throw itself into living, striving, and helping in the meantime.

It is my hope that a generation of preachers will rise up to answer this call and respond to this need by surrendering proof for confession, certainty for faith, and optimism for courage. If we can do that, perhaps we may learn together and once again what it means to live and walk by faith in the grace we have seen, heard, and experienced in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.