Preaching and Postmodernism: An Evangelical Comes to the Dance

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Introduction

These days, everyone appears to be "dancing the edge of mystery" (the now famous phrase originating from David Buttrick in his *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*),[1] so I thought I might visit the dance marathon as well. The phrase appears as the subtitle of Eugene Lowry's book *The Sermon* and as the title of Cornelius Plantinga's review of twenty books and articles from the New Homiletics in *Books and Culture*[2] and can be found in the text or footnotes of virtually every book written from the perspective of the New Homiletic. "Dancing the edge of mystery" in many ways encapsulates what the New Homiletic is about: metaphor and symbol; evocation of an experience; unrestricted movement; and, of course, mystery. Interestingly, the phrase also describes postmodernism. I wonder if there could be some correlation.

My first encounter with a postmodernist occurred in a Ph.D. seminar on Rhetoric in 1984 at the University of Texas at Arlington. The professor made the bold statement that there was no such thing as truth with a capital "T"; there were only truths with a little "t." He proceeded to illustrate this statement by asking the class what the degree of angle on a right triangle was, to which the class replied in unison: "90 degrees." He then asked if this was always true. We said yes. With a big smile he retorted that it was not always true. "If one draws a right triangle on a cylinder, the degree of angle is not 90 but 92" he cheerily informed us. A moment of silence followed as I sensed that some of my classmates were immediately converted to postmodernism. I turned to Danny Akin who was seated beside me and by the gleam in his eye I could tell that he was thinking the same thing I was: the illustration merely proved that in plane geometry, a right triangle always had the angle degree of 90, and in whatever form of geometry you would call a right triangle drawn on a cylinder (the future Vice President of Southern Seminary and I weren't particularly up on our mathematics) the degree of angle was always 92. After some discussion on this point, I am happy to report that Truth with a capital "T" survived.

"Post" is in. Art has its postimpressionism, music has its postlude, undertakers have their postmortems, obstetricians their postpartums (which are, of course, postnatal), authors their postscripts, and geologists their post-Tertiary. Just a few years ago, theologians rarely had to contend with anything "post" beyond that which was subsequent to the council of Nicaea, certain eschatological positions, or the position of *gar* in Greek grammar. Today, we are inundated with lexical items such as "post-liberal," "post-conservative," "post-evangelical," "post-Christian," "post-biblical," and a host of other "posts" that clutter our theological landscape. None, however, is quite so pervasive as "postmodern."

What is postmodernism? How is it to be defined? Can it be defined? Is it chronological or ideological or even logical at all? Many have attempted answers to

these questions, and although unanimity escapes us, a broad consensus has developed. Postmodernism basically denies the objectivity of knowledge and truth. Truth, if it does exist, is socially and communally constructed and cannot exist with a capital "T." Inclusivism is out. Pluralism is in. Metanarratives are out while "story" and "narrative" are in. The individual is out while community is in. Objectivity is out while perspectivism is in.[3]

Postmodernism is nothing less than a shift in worldview. It has a chronological element inherent in its very name: postmodern. It has an ideological element: a whole new set of assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of reality. From this standpoint, it has philosophical, theological, scientific, literary, and many other academic and cultural implications and ramifications as well. Broadly speaking, one could say that modernism was dominated by the hard sciences; postmodernism by the human sciences.

At the risk of being very "un-postmodern," I would suggest the following 10 commandments (in a non-totalizing sense of course) as illustrative of what postmodernism is all about.

> 1) Anti-foundationalism is thy god and thou shalt have no other gods before it.
> 2) Thou shalt not make Logocentrism thy idol neither shalt thou bow down before any (W/w)ord.
> 3) Thou shalt deconstruct everything.
> 4) Honor reality and truth as socially/communally constructed, that it may be well with thee and that thou mightest live long in postmodern academia.
> 5) Remember subjectivity to keep it holy, for objective knowledge and truth with a capital "T" are impossible.
> 6) Thou shalt recognize that narrative is everything and no narrative

> is a metanarrative.
> 7) Thou shalt treat everything as an interpretation, remembering that there abideth three: author, text, and reader, but the greatest of these is reader.
> 8) Thou shalt not deny pluralism: for one will not be held guiltless who tolerates exclusivistic thinking.
> 9) Thou shalt recognize that relativism is the only absolute.
> 10) Thou shalt have no ultimate authority: everyone should do that which is right in its/hers/his/whatever own eyes.

I find it interesting that the popularity of postmodernism in the last quarter of the twentieth century coincides somewhat with the rise and popularity of the New Homiletic. Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority* was published in 1971 and is rightly looked upon as initiating a "new era" and a "Copernican revolution" in homiletics. Is this coincidental or is there a connection? To answer that question, we must identify the basic tenets of postmodernism and look for affinities with the New Homiletic.

First, however, we must ask how the New Homiletic differs from a more traditional homiletic. According to Eugene Lowry, the New Homiletic is

> a paradigmatic shift involving moves from deductive to inductive, from rhetoric to poetic, from space to time, from literality to orality, from prose to poetry, from hot to cool, from creed to hymn, from science to art, from left brain to right brain, from proposition to parable, from direct to indirect, from construction to development, from discursive to aesthetic, from theme to event, from description to image, from point to evocation, from authoritarian to democratic, from truth to meaning, from account to experience.[4]

Perhaps the foundational tenet of the New Homiletic is that discursive, deduc-

tive, propositional preaching is no longer a viable method of communicating with today's postmodern audiences. This is usually assumed to be true for at least two reasons: 1) communication theory has discovered (or, more accurately, rediscovered) the importance of the listener, and 2) the rise of narrative as a fundamental category in the human sciences coupled with the discovery (or rediscovery) of the narrative form of much of the Scriptures mandates a narrative approach to preaching.[5]

In *As One Without Authority*, Craddock championed "inductive" preaching as opposed to the more traditional "deductive" model. The goal of preaching as he saw it was to create an experience in the listener that would effect a hearing of the gospel. In the same year in which Craddock's seminal work appeared, Stephen Crites's article "The Narrative Quality of Experience" was published.[6] Crites viewed narrative as the universal condition of human consciousness. Narrative is at the very heart of human existence.

Another key element in the New Homiletic is the idea that the goal of preaching is not the communication of information (which is secondary or tertiary at best and according to Craddock was counter-productive) but rather the evocation of an experience. The sermon is a communication event in which the audience, with the help of the preacher, creates or discovers "meaning" and is led to a new way of seeing the world created by the gospel.[7] The theological underpinning for this concept harks back especially to Emil Brunner and H. Richard Niebuhr.[8]

According to Richard Eslinger, if human experience is inherently narratival and temporal, a sermon should be designed to be experienced and to create an experience rather than to assemble thoughts.[9] Eugene Lowry says that a sermon is an ordered form of moving time.[10] In Lowry's understanding of homiletics, narrative is essential because time is "central to the homiletical event."[11]

These two key elements—the rejection of so called deductive, propositional preaching in favor of a narrative structure and the goal of preaching being that of evocation of an experience in the listener—form the twin pillars of the New Homiletic. Lowry notes in his *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* that the issues being raised by postmodernism are "crucial" for the developing sermonic principles of the New Homiletic.[12]

What I propose to do is to take the 10 commandments of postmodernism above and briefly relate each one to elements of the New Homiletic. "Briefly" is the operative word here. In most cases, we will only consider one or two examples in each category, though more could be given. This will not, however, be simply a descriptive article. I cannot resist an occasional critique of postmodernism or the New Homiletic along the way.

Anti-foundationalism

There can be no doubt that the philosophical concept of anti-foundationalism undergirds (pun intended) postmodernism. From a modernist perspective, foundationalism begins with Descartes and is traceable throughout Enlightenment modernity. Simply put, foundationalism is the perspective that knowledge is based on certain absolute first principles or truths and the attempt to establish those first principles constitutes the foundationalist project. Foundationalism is very much a modernistic construct and is heartily rejected by

postmodernism.[13]

John McClure's review of *Beyond Interpretation: the Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* by Gianni Vattimo and of *Religion* edited by Jacques Derrida and Vattimo illustrates the anti-foundationalist approach of some within the New Homiletic.[14] McClure, who teaches homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, is thoroughly postmodern in his homiletical orientation. He quotes approvingly both Vattimo and Derrida, and concludes by telling us that in them we find "fleeting glimpses of the nature of the homiletical project in a postmodern world."[15]

Yet not all within the New Homiletic are committed to the first commandment of anti-foundationalism. For example, Scott Johnston steers us clear of nihilism à la Mark Taylor, but reminds us that within homiletics, we must live with uncertainty. In *Theology of Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos*, Johnston, together with co-authors Barbara Blaisdell and Ronald Allen, provide a bird's-eye view of the inroads of anti-foundationalism in homiletics. While this book does not advocate an anti-foundationalist approach, it does give too much ground to postmodernism in several areas, including epistemology, the nature of truth, authority, and related issues. (Examples will be noted in most of the "commandments" below.) Allen's adherence to process theology makes it virtually impossible for him not to agree with some aspects of postmodern anti-foundationalism. Thus, even though we cannot say that the New Homiletic completely accepts anti-foundationalism, it is obvious that some of its practitioners have been influenced by it.

Logocentrism and Deconstruction

I will treat the two commandments concerning logocentrism and deconstruction together since they are so closely related. Whenever one finds an anti-foundationalist ontological approach as in the postmodern project, one can rest assured that a critique of logocentrism won't be far behind. According to postmodernism, since language is used in a variety of ways in a variety of cultures, it cannot represent reality. Philosophers from Plato on have been deceived in thinking that we could access reality through language. Indeed, postmodernism informs us that we can know nothing outside our language. All attempts via language to refer to extensive reality are doomed to failure, hence Derridian deconstructionism.

The postmodernist view of language and truth is ably described by Groothuis:

> Truth is not established by anything outside of the mind or the culture that shapes beliefs. The word "truth" is simply a contingent creation of language, which has various uses in various cultures…. It cannot be said to represent or mirror reality itself. Our access to the territory of reality is through our language, which acts as a map. But we cannot check the map against the territory, since we can know nothing outside our language…When language attempts to refer to anything outside language itself, it fails.[16]

Without taking the time to critique deconstruction's errant view of language,[17] I shall reference Joseph Webb's comments on sermon methodology in his *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* to compare homiletics with these two commandments. Webb makes use of Kenneth Burke's symbolic view of the text in his own approach to sermon preparation. He

correctly notes that Burke's methodology is actually a form of inductive textual deconstruction antedating Derrida.[18] Although it lacks the "harshness" of a Derridian approach, Webb's approach, following Burke, produces a "radically different body of 'information' about the text," including "a sense of its undercurrents, its assumptions, implicit ideas, unspoken definitions, and veiled assertions."[19]

According to Webb, preaching is affected in at least three ways by this approach. First, rather than involving the preacher in reviewing the surface narrative or didaction of the text, the preacher gains a new insight into the text's outlook. The text's underlying motivations, its underbelly as it were, must be brought to light through the "taking apart" and "turning over" (deconstructing) of the text. Finding the underlying symbolic organization of the text and sharing this in the sermon is the goal.[20] This is not an "irreverent" attitude toward the text, according to Webb. It is a deconstruction of the text, however.

The second way in which preachers benefit from this approach has to do with the Bible's plurivocity. Because this relates to commandment number 8 above, I shall reserve comment until later. The third benefit lies in the way the preacher and congregation can "confront and challenge" a text to expose its "ideology."[21] According to Webb, the biblical text is in some ways more "ideological than theological"! It needs to be probed in such a way that the preacher does not "let the text off the hook" with what it may appear to say on the surface.

> One can ask the text to demonstrate its ideology.… If this sounds somewhat devious, it is not.…This is a way, however, that the preacher can, with honesty and integrity, analyze and evaluate a text, and shall we say, reject it—not "out of hand," but "for cause."[22]

"When one preaches this way… one's preaching takes on a sparkle that instead of demeaning the Bible, will actually give the Bible a vitality that it can receive in no other way."[23]

Webb would probably be on the far left on this issue. Less breathtaking but nonetheless problematic is Scott Johnston's discussion of the Derridian program for homiletics. Rejecting the hard-line deconstruction of Mark Taylor, Johnston promotes an "alternative trajectory"— the Derridian "trace" or "shadow," the "partial presence," the "mystery" which is "an aspect of truth preachers do well to contemplate."[24] I have offered a critique of Johnston's thought elsewhere.[25]

Groothuis offers a salient critique of the Derridian program and its effect upon the text and preachers:

> Derrida removes any objective meaning from texts; their meaning is forever indeterminate…. If a text is intrinsically and irreducibly equivocal, its meaning is unavailable and its interpreters can never be judged rationally against the one meaning of the text itself. The author vanishes, and readers are left adrift. Since Scripture is God's inspired word…, it *does* possess a "permanent identity that is absolutely its own." The divine author employed human authors to make truth known. Our concern is how to interpret rightly and truly the objective meaning of the text, to discern how it coheres with the rest of Scripture and how the text applies to us today.[26]

It would seem that some within the New Homiletic are using deconstruction to varying degrees as a philosophical and methodological approach to the sermon.

Reality and Truth as Socially Constructed

Ever since Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, cultural constructivisim has been an entrenched axiom of postmodernity (even though we cannot have "entrenched axioms" in postmodernism!). If the chief error of modernism was the construction of a totalizing system falsely so called, the new error of postmodernism is the acceptance of cultural constructivism.[27] In postmodernism, communities construct truth according to their use of language and the experiences that are shaped by their linguistic community.

This notion of cultural constructivism can be adequately refuted on philosophical as well as linguistic grounds. For example, Groothuis tackles it philosophically[28] and Robert Longacre tackles it linguistically in several places in his writings. Longacre argues against radical epistemological relativism in linguistics by pointing out that languages segment certain aspects of reality in a rather consistent manner and that "this points to a 'natural' segmentation of reality perhaps inescapable for us as human beings."[29]

Whenever I read Lindbeck and the postliberals on community, the question keeps coming to mind: what does the community "commune" around if truth is socially constructed? What transcends all communities? The obvious answer: their use of language. Language is the one thing all communities have in common. How they acquired that capacity for language remains a debated question. The social science view of language acquisition says that the human psyche is molded by the surrounding culture. Yet a single roadblock continually thwarts this view:

a linguist named Chomsky. It is not just that communities use language with a little "l," but that they have capacity for Language. Evidence now exists to show that all languages have a semantic structure (deep structure, notional structure), and that these structures comprise a finite set of cognitive/communication relations that are not language specific. The explanation for this on an evolutionary model or a social/scientific model is hard to come by. These communication relations act as a natural metaphysic of the human mind. They appear to be a part of the *imago dei*. The result is that communication is possible. The marvel is not that we often misinterpret one another, the marvel is that we can communicate at all![30]

According to John McClure, a new generation of mainstream pulpit preachers, who no longer yearn nostalgically for foundational truths to preach, have arrived on the scene. For them the truth of the gospel is community dependent and can only be known within a particular tradition, in a particular community, at a particular time.[31]

Virtually every book and article in recent years from the New Homiletic has some space devoted to the role of the community in preaching. Eugene Lowry tells us, "We simply cannot talk about the sermon or any kind of meaning outside the communal context."[32] Chapter six in Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston's *Theology for Preaching* is devoted to the issue.[33] Thomas Long addressed it in "And How Shall They Hear: The Listener in Contemporary Preaching,"[34] Lucy Atkinson Rose advocated sermons as conversations where preacher and congregation enter into dialogue both in the process of sermon construction as well as in the preaching event.[35]

It would seem that a clear correlation can be made between the postmodern emphasis on community and what is taking place in the New Homiletic. Certainly not all within the New Homiletic would affirm, without reservation, the postmodern concept that reality and truth are socially constructed. But there is a clear move toward the audience in preaching. More than ever, through rhetorical strategies built on contemporary communication theory, homiletics is deeply concerned with the role the audience/community plays in the sermon event.

Remember Subjectivity

The previous four commandments make the fifth a necessity for postmodernism. If foundationalism and logocentrism are null and void philosophically, then deconstruction would be a logical outcome. With deconstruction comes the recognition that reality and truth must be socially constructed. If that is the case, then subjectivism is inescapable.

Subjectivism comes in two brands: healthy and unhealthy. Healthy subjectivity recognizes that total objectivity is impossible. Evangelicals long before Bultmann believed that exegesis without presuppositions was impossible, though one would not imagine that evangelicals could entertain such a notion from reading their non- evangelical counterparts on the subject.

Unhealthy subjectivity suffers from the postmodern disease of "objectivitis." Objectivitis occurs when one's theological diet consists of the rejection of God as the ultimate subject/author in the universe. Since only God could have a God's-eye view of things and can communicate such (dare I say "truths" or "information") about Himself, us, and the world via

revelation, then the banishment of the ultimate Author leaves all other authors out in the cold.

Let us not fail to lay part of the blame on Locke and Kant, for it was Locke who (wrongly) held that the percepts (ideas) that we perceive in our minds are the objects of which we are directly conscious. This was a crucial philosophical mistake, for Locke held, and virtually all since him, that the awareness of our ideas in our minds is a private experience. Locke locked philosophy into the view of ideas as that which we directly apprehend with the result that each of us is locked up in the private world of our own subjective experience.

Kant, following Hume, didn't help us out either. He compounded the problem by erecting a wall between the noumena and the phenomena; and with it sowed the seeds that would, after being watered by Enlightenment modernity, sprout into postmodernity.

But we are quickly getting too far afield. Suffice it to say that confusion results when postmodern subjectivists fail to acknowledge and/or distinguish three things: the existence of truth, the proclamation of truth, and the reception of truth. Having rejected the notion of truth with a capital "T," subjectivists collapse the other two into a single entity.

What of the New Homiletic? Any evidence of an unhealthy subjectivity?

It would seem so. Ron Allen rejects truth as correspondence and yet affirms that the preacher can "confidently proclaim that the text is true" because the claim of the text corresponds to the experience of the congregation.[36] This is an unhealthy subjectivism. No doubt Allen would agree with Schuyler Brown: the Bible is true not because it can be verified,

but because it enlightens the reader.[37] Brown, following Carl Jung, believes that the reader's understanding of revelation is the process of divine self-disclosure within the human soul. He cites Jung's description of Paul's experience on the Damascus road as not the historical Jesus appearing to him, but rather as an "apparition" coming to him from the depths of his own consciousness. Brown further notes that the same experience Paul received can be mediated to us by reading Scripture. The final sentence of the book reveals the problem we all face in the theological game when people use the same vocabulary but not the same dictionary: "The purpose of this book has been to reaffirm the revelatory function of holy writ."[38]

Finally, Joseph Webb's *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* illustrates the fact that once any form of an objective revelation is given up, subjectivity prevails and is celebrated in the homiletical enterprise. We will hear more about him below when we talk about pluralism. Meanwhile, I wonder, "Why are all the walls mirrors here at the dance hall?"

Narrative is Everything but No Narrative is a Metanarrative

In the last third of the twentieth century, narrative became the Cinderella of literary criticism. From there it became the darling of theologians as well with the rise of narrative criticism, narrative theology, narrative hermeneutics, and finally narrative homiletics. Of course, not all of this is bad. It was high time that theologians of every stripe recognized once again the fact that much of the Scripture is given in narrative form. It is well nigh impossible to interpret Genesis 22, Psalm 22, and Romans 8 aright without a recognition of the different discourse genre each reflects.

The problem came when narrative was given a privileged status over everything else. The problem intensified when narrative theologians continued to work within the confines of an outmoded historical-critical framework that continued and continues to erode biblical authority. Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* became a major catalyst for narrative theologians. One critical problem that continues to nag narrative theology is its sidestepping of questions about the truth/reality to which a discourse refers. This has been a criticism leveled at narrative theology from both non-evangelicals and evangelicals.

One does not need to read much in the field of homiletics today to discover the impact of narrative theology. Within homiletics, although there are a number of sermonic models used,[39] the dominate "umbrella model" for sermon methodology is called narrative preaching. Many sermonic forms huddle together under the umbrella of narrative preaching. A sermon on a narrative discourse in the Bible is called narrative preaching. A sermon crafted in the form of a "story" or series of "stories" is called narrative preaching. This, however, is not the main thrust of what is meant by the term. A narrative sermon is identified by its plot, which involves conflict, complication and rising tension, reversal, and then resolution.

Paul Scott Wilson's description of a narrative sermon is helpful.

> A narrative sermon is a sermon that makes primary use of story to develop an idea, attitude, or experience for the congregation. It proceeds not by argument and propositions but by plot, character, and emotion.… Its truth is recognized not through logical reasoning

and objective proof. Rather, the sermon is tested by its correspondence to Scripture and life experience.… Its source of unity is poetics, for example: plot; controlling images; a particular event, location, or time; identification; a sense of completed action, growth, or emotional resolution. Narration implies a flexible organic structure and varied forms.[40]

Those homiletes who put all their eggs in the narrative basket tend to disparage expository preaching. One finds little exposition of the text in most narrative sermons. The goal is the evocation of an experience—a very postmodern goal. Of course, there are experiences and there are experiences. Not all experiences are created equal. Furthermore, experiences are not devoid of cognitive content and a truth factor.

Claims by those who argue that preaching should be in a narrative mode and not expositional in nature do not increase the likelihood of the listener experiencing God, but rather make it less so. Cognitive, propositional content may be a dirty word in homiletics today, but the fact is that one cannot "experience" someone fully without knowing something about that someone. The unnecessary bifurcation between "propositional" and "personal" has always been misplaced, whether in a theological discussion about the nature of revelation or in a discussion about the nature of preaching. Both are indispensable.[41]

Craig Localzo's *Apologetic Preaching* is a recent example of an attempt to preach to the postmodern world from a narrative framework. He avoids demonizing postmodernism, offers little theological critique of it, but does attempt to suggest how preachers may preach to postmoderns. As you might guess, he recommends against logical argumentation and sug-

gests a narrative approach since this is how people process information today.[42]

More satisfying and helpful is David Larsen's *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching*, which offers a critique of narrative preaching but then presents a valuable method for preaching the narrative genre of the Bible.[43] Although this excellent book is from the pen of a noted evangelical homiletician and is over 300 pages in length, one is hard pressed to find it mentioned or even listed in the bibliography of those writing from the perspective of the New Homiletic.

A number of assumptions about language, communication, and the nature of the biblical text lie behind narrative preaching, and it is not within the scope of this article to evaluate them. My goal is simply to point out that the postmodern love affair with narrative is clearly reflected in the New Homiletic.

Has the New Homiletic given us more "biblical" preaching with the rediscovery of narrative? I think not. Schuyler Brown notes: "On the one hand, we have access to more information about the Bible than at any previous period in history. On the other hand, there has never been a time when the Bible has had less influence in main-line Protestant churches."[44]

One final question, though. If narrative is a universal category, is this not a metanarrative?

The Issue of Hermeneutics

One of the distinguishing marks of postmodernism is the hermeneutical revolution. The shift from author to text and then from text to reader à la reader response criticism in literary theory found its way into philosophical hermeneutics and then into theological hermeneutics rather quickly.

In his book, *Texts Under Negotiation: the Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann insists that the practice of homiletical hermeneutics should be "contextual, local and pluralistic."[45] John McClure tells of the likelihood that the next generation of preachers will not be so eager to be in "absolute control" of the process of interpretation.[46] Ronald Allen says that the postmodern preacher will recognize that his interpretations are just that: interpretations. There will be no place for arrogance; rather a hermeneutical humility should prevail.[47] This is a primary theme in Kevin Vanhoozer's *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* But Vanhoozer offers a much better philosophical/theological understanding of that humility than does Allen.[48]

Both Allen and McClure, like Brueggemann, affirm that the postmodern preacher must recognize that all statements are negotiations of positions within a larger communicative field. Just how wide open is this hermeneutical communicative field? The last chapter of Allen's book *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* is entitled "Preaching in a Postmodern Perspective" and includes a sermon by John McClure on Philippians 2:5-11. Allen's introductory remarks to the sermon include the following: "This sermon … makes use of the postmodern decentering of the self to reinterpret Paul's language of self-emptying in Philippians 2."[49] McClure states in his sermon that Christ emptied himself of his desire to use his power for domination, to use others for his own ends. He further states that, being born in human likeness, "Jesus had no assurance that he could empty himself of these evil patterns of dominating power."[50] It would be difficult to imagine a more convoluted Christology.

One gets a taste of just how far some within the New Homiletic are willing to go to "reinterpret" biblical language and dance the edge of mystery. It remains to be seen just how many of the New Homiletic homiletes will be willing to be dance partners with McClure.

Pluralism

Postmodernity demands pluralism since there is no such thing as objective truth with a capital "T." Few sins will earn you greater excoriation from the prophets of pluralism as exclusivistic thinking. The issue of pluralism was catapulted into the theological arena about a quarter of a century ago with the publication of John Cobb's *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* in 1975. Cobb, a process theologian, has been at the forefront of the battle being waged over pluralism within theology.

The Claremont School of Theology would probably be considered the "hub" of process theology today. It is no coincidence then that the foremost book written by a homiletician on the subject of preaching and pluralism comes from Joseph Webb, a Claremont professor. Webb is a thoroughgoing advocate of pluralism à la Cobb and his book (already referenced) seeks to tell preachers how one can preach to a pluralist culture. His purpose in writing the book is to quell the fear among preachers that, once we give up the "certainties" of the Christian tradition, we will have to give up preaching. Webb believes that such a fear is unjustified.[51]

Taking his cue from process sociology developed at the Chicago School of Sociology, Webb constructed his approach to pluralism and preaching as the theme of his book. Pertinent to our discussion is Webb's final chapter "Pluralism and the

Gospel: Prophetic Otherness for the Postmodern Pulpit." When we ask the question, "What is the gospel?," we are forced, Webb says, to respond that there is no consensus concerning a single answer. Traditionally, Christianity has been based on an absolute sense of the gospel. This is, according to Webb, a mirage.

> What we have believed, particularly about Jesus, we can continue to believe as a way to give spiritual meaning and substance to the lives we live. We can even take our beliefs as ultimate for our own lives, as we choose to do. But it is no longer tenable for us to assert our beliefs about Jesus—about divinity, about resurrection, about his being the only path to God—as final, complete, and unalterable for every human being everywhere.[52]

A remarkably totalizing statement for a postmodern homilete.

Although many in the New Homiletic (thankfully) will not go all the way with Webb on the issue of pluralism, there is growing evidence of a leaning towards his direction. For example, Ronald Allen cracks the door open when he informs us that the "literary discord" that we find in the Scriptures, particularly in the gospel accounts of Jesus, "makes it difficult to argue that the Bible is equipped to articulate a unified, definitive portrait of God *all on its own*."[53] As a matter of fact, Allen finds fissures in each of the five basic sources for Christianity: Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, and community, and argues that they do not provide a sufficient foundation "for determinative words about God."[54] Paul Scott Wilson likewise leans in a pluralist direction when he remarks that it is the same God who speaks not only in Scripture, but also in other faiths as well.[55]

David Buttrick suggests that the Holy Spirit is active in our world not only in Christianity, but in political parties, liberation movements, and other religions.[56] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, dean and professor of theology at Claremont, asked in a sermon, "What are we to do theologically about those who exhibit a righteous life but do not accept this particular faith of ours?" Her answer: "Pluralism!"[57]

Joseph Webb suggests that although prophetic preaching after the model of the Hebrew prophets is no longer viable, prophetic preaching is still needed. Webb redefines it as preaching in a pluralist vein, which becomes a "call to uncertainty."[58] Perhaps the door of pluralism is opened wider than I thought in the New Homiletic. After all, I do see many unusual dance partners here at the dance marathon.

Relativism

The theologian, Mark Taylor, wrote "Everything in the divine milieu is thoroughly transitional and radically relative."[59] One clear dividing line between modernism and postmodernism is that the former believed in absolutes, while the later contends that absolutes are dead. The extent to which relativism pervades the postmodern milieu, i.e., whether it is a radical relativism or not, remains a matter of debate. But all postmoderns are finding it difficult to avoid the slippery slope of relativism, regardless of their positions.

The New Homiletic has not escaped the decentering of authority in postmodernism. Ronald Allen avers that "all language about God is relative."[60] Of course this means that all theological language about God is relative and that all preaching about God must partake of relativity as well. Preachers of the New Homiletic find it difficult to avoid bi-polar tendencies

when it comes to the issue of relativism. On the one hand, they don't want to give up the core of Christianity; on the other hand, they disparage propositional truth.

William Willimon is a prime example of this schizophrenia in his *Christianity Today* article "Jesus' Peculiar Truth." He wants to claim that Jesus did not arrive enunciating a set of propositional truths to be believed, but rather presented Himself as the truth to be followed.[61] Willimon recognizes the low intellectual and moral state of our culture, but doubts that the problem is relativism. He fails to realize that his own epistemological and theological assumptions (and that of his fellow adherents of the New Homiletic) makes relativism in preaching inescapable.[62]

Joseph Webb attempts to confront relativism head on in *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism*. Relativity is not "destructive" for homiletics; preaching must be reevaluated and reworked against its background.[63] Webb tells us that in light of pluralism, preaching must take full account of the "axiom of relativity," i.e., all meaning, including biblical and theological meaning, is a human construct.[64] Symbolic absolutes do not and cannot exist.[65] For him, two streams feed into the approach to preaching he advocates: process theology and narrative theology.[66]

Thus, it would seem that the New Homiletic, however much it struggles to evade the tentacles of relativity, has in some ways succumbed to it. How well the dance partners of postmodernism and the New Homiletic will fare in the future relative to relativism is unclear.

Authority

The dawning of the twenty-first century has confirmed Edward Farley's oft-repeated statement: "the house of authority has collapsed."[67] The issue of authority was the quintessential issue of modernity with its celebration of the autonomy of reason over the authority of revelation. Modernity distrusted authority. Postmodernity dismantles authority. Biblical authority particularly suffers under the weight of postmodernity. Lyotard refers to the Bible as fable with "its despotic deposit of divine utterance."[68]

Recently, I have devoted an entire article to the issue of biblical authority and homiletics.[69] I shall draw some comments from homileticians referenced in that article and add a few more.

Let's begin with the dean of homileticians, David Buttrick. For him, the idea that Scripture is the Word of God is a "groundless notion of Biblical authority."[70]

"There is no pure gospel; no, not even in the Bible. To be blunt, the Christian Scriptures are both sexist and anti-Semitic."[71] Paul Scott Wilson's notion of biblical authority is scarcely different from Buttrick's. He appeals to Buttrick for support of the statement "the authority of Scripture derives from the nature of preaching as divine event."[72] This is a total reversal of the historic orthodox position.

Ronald Allen, referring to the Exodus account of the Israelites' escape through the Red Sea, says "we can no longer determine exactly what happened at the Red Sea. Apparently a small band of Hebrew slaves who were escaping from Egypt were on the verge of capture.... Something made it possible for them to escape."[73] How would a sermon making these assertions fare? Apparently quite well in today's postmodern climate, we are told, because authority no longer rests

in the pulpit or in the Bible, "but in the conversation of gospel, preacher, and listening community."[74] If the preacher or the listening community or both find the biblical account too fantastic to believe, well, so be it.

Building on Buttrick and Farley, Allen claims that preaching's relationship to the Bible can be summed up in one statement: "The authority of the gospel supersedes that of the Bible."[75] In other words, preaching should focus not on texts of Scripture, which are expounded, but on "the gospel." (Allen's definition of the gospel is somewhat truncated, suffering from his adherence to process theology, but that's a discussion for another time.)

Scott Black Johnston compares postmodern notions of authority to contemporary homiletics and finds some correlation. While he rejects the hard-line a/theological stance of Mark Taylor, who pronounced that God as Author is dead, he finds some aspects of postmodern and homiletical views of authority to run on parallel tracks. The most significant point of contact occurs in their emphasis on the listener.[76] Barbara Blaisdell likewise sees authority for homiletics to be rooted in the community of listeners.[77] Ronald Allen concurs and suggests that the sermon may be monological in form but should be dialogical in character.[78]

Here we find ourselves at the fountainhead of the New Homiletic in many ways. Remember that it was Fred Craddock's 1971 book, significantly titled *As One Without Authority*, which gave birth to the New Homiletic. What did Craddock mean by this title? He meant to signal a shift, a shift in authority from preacher to congregation. Johnston rightly notes that it would be inaccurate to conclude that Craddock's work represents a postmodern homiletic.[79] Many within the New Homiletic today, however, have indeed constructed "postmodern" homiletical theories building on both Craddock as well as many elements of postmodernism.[80] Buttrick's summary treatment "On Doing Homiletics Today" outlines the theoretical and methodological concerns that a postmodern homiletic should include, such as theological revision, cultural formulation, a social hermeneutic, and the preacher as symbol-giver.[81] Likewise, Walter Brueggemann's article, "Preaching as Reimagination," is one of the best illustrations of what a postmodern homiletic looks like.[82] Most of the ten commandments of postmodernism I posit are affirmed from a homiletical perspective there.

Buttrick and Brueggemann both illustrate the radical change in the issue of authority for preaching. In the postmodern world of homiletics, look for sermons to be tentative, less authoritative and more humble with lines like, "If you don't repent, so to speak, you might go to hell, as it were," (if such notions as repentance and hell are mentioned at all).

Conclusion

A few closing (apologies to deconstructionists again) observations are in order. First, it would be incorrect to conclude that the New Homiletic is thoroughly postmodern in its orientation. It is not. Although we have noted many corollaries, it is doubtful that one could find many homileticians who would affirm all ten of these postmodern commandments. The first three especially create problems for most. To homiletically paraphrase Robert Frost in "Mending Wall," "Something there is about preaching that does not love an unsure Word from God."

Second, from an evangelical homiletical perspective, many of the insights of the New Homiletic are valuable, e.g., Buttrick's concept of sermon moves, the proper treatment of the narrative genre of Scripture, the importance of the listener in the sermon event, and the role of imagination in preaching. Evangelical preachers should learn from our counterparts in the New Homiletic. (After all, some of our preachers are closet members of their society!)

Third, to the extent that New Homileticians have imbibed the postmodern academic culture theologically and philosophically, their homiletical theory and practice will continue to be seriously flawed. This is especially evidenced in commandments 4-10. Reality and truth are not socially constructed, objectivity when balanced with subjectivity is possible, narrative is not everything and some metanarratives are true, there are valid as well as invalid interpretations, pluralism and relativism have not won the day philosophically or theologically, and as long as there is a God heaven, there is a final authority. If indeed God is our final authority, then as the author of Hebrews reminds us in the macrostructure of his epistle, when God speaks, we better listen.

Before we leave the dance floor, I would like to conclude this article with three quotes from authors representing different theological traditions, but who speak with a unified voice on the issue of preaching. Few would be as bold as Roy Harrisville, but, in my view, his directness is matched by his correctness. Elizabeth Achtemeier offers a needed word about the hubris that afflicts some of us who preach. Finally, systematic theologian Wayne Grudem's salient connection of the authority of preaching and God's

powerful words in Scripture is right on the money.

> … in all that confused prattle of an entire guild of interpreters, amnesiac, and reading only themselves, in a frenzy to tell or hear something new, but emerging only with "the same song, second verse, a little louder, and a little worse." … Whoever you are, if you do not repent and believe the testimony laid down in this book [the Bible] concerning God and his Christ, it will judge you to inconsequence, render your reading of it, your interpretation of it, your preaching on it a comic spectacle to the world to which you believed you had to adjust it, and your church will die. As well it should.[83]

> Human pride … is in our time the terrible disease of the mainline churches.…It is not only the historical critics who are to blame, of course, but also those preachers in countless churches who, instead of preaching from the Scriptures, are preaching from the commentaries.… To be sure there are hundreds of faithful preachers in this country. But there are also hundreds who would be astounded to think that God actually speaks through the Bible and who have never had that expectation.[84]

> Throughout the history of church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized that they have no authority in themselves and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scripture and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers. Their preaching has drawn its power not from the proclamation of the their own Christian experiences or the experiences of others, nor from their own opinions, creative ideas, or rhetorical skills, but from God's powerful words. Essentially they stood in the pulpit, pointed to the biblical texts and said in effect to the congregation, 'This is what this verse means. Do you see the meaning here as well? Then you must believe it and obey it with all your heart, for God himself is say-

ing this to you today!' Only the written words of Scripture can give this kind of authority to preaching.[85]

Shall we dance?

ENDNOTES

[1]David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 189.

[2]Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997); Cornelius Plantinga, "Dancing the Edge of Mystery," *Books and Culture* (September/October, 1999) 16-19.

[3]For introductory and detailed discussions of postmodernism, mostly from an evangelical perspective, the following can be consulted: Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994); David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton: Victor/Bridgepoint Books, 1995); Dennis McCallum, ed., *The Death of Truth* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1996); Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[4]Eugene Lowry, "The Revolution of Sermonic Shape," in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock*, Gail O'Day and Thomas Long, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 95-96.

[5]A plethora of books and articles that address one or more aspects of the New Homiletic could be listed. The following is a limited, but helpful, listing. Richard Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletical Method* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987) and *Narrative and Imagination:*

Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Robert Stephen Reid, "Postmodernism and the Function of the New Homiletic in Post-Christendom Congregations," *Homiletic* 20, no. 2 (1995) 1-13; Robert Reed, Jeffrey Bullock, and David Fleer, "Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic," *Journal of Communication and Religion* 21, no. 2 (1998) 1-9.

[6]Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291-311.

[7]See especially Reed, et al. on this point.

[8]Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 2nd ed. rev., trans. by David Cairns & T. H. L. Parker, from *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1941).

[9]Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination*, 7.

[10]Lowry, *The Sermon*, 19.

[11]Ibid., 20. Note also Heidegger's *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh from *Sein und Zeit* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996) and Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer from *Temps et Récit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988) for the philosophical background to what Lowry, Eslinger, and a host of other New Homiletes are saying.

[12]Lowry, *The Sermon*, 28.

[13]The best literary anthology on postmodernism to my mind is that of Lawrence Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996). For a critique of anti-foundationalism and the best over-

all evangelical critique of postmodernism to date, consult Groothuis, *Truth Decay*. Stephen Moore's *Poststructuralism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) has an excellent annotated bibliography on postmodernism through 1993.

[14] John McClure, *Homiletic* 25.2 (2000) 48-54.

[15] Ibid., 54.

[16] Groothuis, 93.

[17] One of the best critiques of Derridian deconstruction I've ever read comes from the pen of a linguist, Robert Hall, "Deconstructing Derrida on Language," in *Linguistics and Pseudo-Linguistics: Selected Essays 1965-1985*, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, Vol. 55, ed. E. F. Konrad Koerner (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987) 116-122.

[18] Joseph Webb, *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998) 92. In addition, see his "Deconstruction/Reconstruction: New Preaching from Old Texts," *Quarterly Review* 16.4 (1996) 425-450.

[19] Ibid., 98. See also David Timmerman, "Avenues of Invention for Contemporary Preaching: Burke's Theory of Form and Christian Homiletics," *Journal of the American Academy of Ministry* 3.3 (1995) 34-45 who applies Burke's approach to homiletics.

[20] Ibid., 99.

[21] Ibid., 100.

[22] Ibid., 101.

[23] Ibid., 101-102

[24] Johnston, *Theology for Preaching*, 74-75.

[25] David Allen, "A Tale of Two Roads: Homiletics and Biblical Authority," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:3 (September 2000) 499.

[26] Groothuis, 230-231.

[27] Ibid., 129.

[28] Ibid., 83-110.

[29] Robert Longacre, Review of *Language and Reality*, in *Language* 32 (1956) 304.

[30] Robert Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse* (New York/London: Plenum, 1983) 337-356. See also Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, enlarged ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

[31] John McClure, "Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues" *Homiletic* 22, no. 1 (1997) 1.

[32] Lowry, *The Sermon*, 40.

[33] Allen, et al., 137-160.

[34] Thomas Long, "And How Shall They Hear: The Listener in Contemporary Preaching," in *Listening to the Word*, 167-188.

[35] Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

[36] Allen, *Theology for Preaching*, 66, 169.

[37] Schuyler Brown, *Text and Psyche: Experiencing Scripture Today* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 29.

[38] Ibid., 141.

[39] In his *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery*, Lowry acknowledges the plurality of voices in the field and attempts to chart the current shape of the New Homiletic by identifying six types or models of sermons: the inductive sermon, the story sermon, the narrative sermon, the transconscious African American sermon, the phenomenological move sermon, and the conversational-episodal sermon (20-28).

[40] Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 208. See also Eugene Lowry, "Narrative Preaching," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 342-344.

[41] See David Cairns trenchant critique of Bultmann on this issue in his *A Gospel without Myth? Bultmann's Challenge to the Preacher* (London: SCM Press, 1960) 213-218.

[42] Craig Loscalzo, *Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

[43] David Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995). Bryan Chapell also offers a valuable critique of narrative preaching in his "When Narrative is not Enough," *Presbyterion* 22, no. 1 (1996) 3-16. Critiques of narrative preaching by those within the New Homiletic are hard to come by, but see, for example, Scott Johnston, "Who Listens to Stories? Cautions and Challenges for Narrative Preaching," *Insights* 111, no. 2 (1996) 4-13.

[44] Brown, 136.

[45] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 8-10.

[46] John McClure, "Conversation and Proclamation: Resources and Issues," *Homiletic* 22, no. 1 (1997) 7.

[47] Allen, *Theology for Preaching*, 70.

[48] Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text?: The Bible, The Reader*

and the Reality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

[49]Ronald Allen, ed., *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998) 247.

[50]Ibid., 249-250.

[51]Webb, 2.

[52]Ibid., 103-110

[53]Allen, *Theology for Preaching*, 125.

[54]Ibid., 127.

[55]Wilson, 75.

[56]David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 106.

[57]Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Preaching from the Perspective of Revisionary Theology," in *Patterns of Preaching*, 240.

[58]Webb, 108.

[59]Mark, Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 16.

[60]Allen, *Theology for Preaching*, 122.

[61]William Willimon, "Jesus' Peculiar Truth," *Christianity Today,* 4 March 1996, 21.

[62]Ibid., 21-22. See Groothuis's critique of Willimon's *Christianity Today* article in his *Truth Decay,* 140-145.

[63]Webb, 14.

[64]Ibid., 105.

[65]Ibid., 106.

[66]Ibid., 118-119.

[67]Edward Farley, "Scripture and Tradition,*" Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 2d ed., Peter Hodgson and Robert King, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 76.

[68]Jean-François Lyotard, "Retortion in Theopolitics," *Toward the Postmodern* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1993) 122.

[69]Allen, "A Tale of Two Roads," 489-515.

[70]Buttrick, *A Captive Voice*, 30.

[71]Ibid., 75.

[72]Wilson, 137.

[73]Ronald Allen, *Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1984) 65.

[74]Blaisdell, *Theology for Preaching*, 47.

[75]Ronald Allen, "Why Preach from Passages in the Bible?" in *Preaching as a Theological Task: World, Gospel, Scripture in Honor of David Buttrick* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) 178.

[76]Johnston, *Theology for Preaching,* 50-51.

[77]Ibid., 44.

[78]See the entire discussion on this issue of authority in homiletics by Allen, et al. in *Theology for Preaching,* 35-57.

[79]Ibid., 52.

[80]The best single source to illustrate the various homiletical styles today would be the thirty-four different annotated sermon examples collected by Ronald Allen in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*.

[81]David Buttrick, "On Doing Homiletics Today," in *Intersections: Postcritical Studies in Preaching*, Richard Eslinger, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 88-104.

[82]Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching as Reimagination" in *Theology Today* 52, no. 3 (1995) 313-329.

[83]Roy Harrisville, "The Loss of Biblical Authority and Its Recovery," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 60-61.

[84]Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Canon as the Voice of the Living God," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, 121-122.

[85]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 82. See also Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Word: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 15-26.