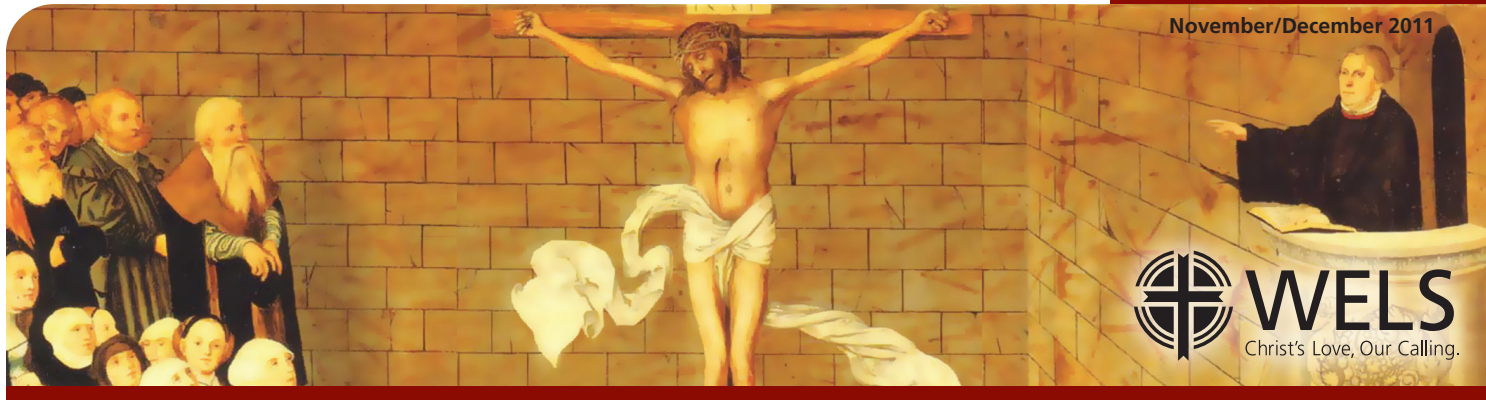


Preach the Word

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Proclaiming the Gospel to a Storied Postmodern Culture

Proclaim Grace! Key Issue #7

By Richard Gurgel

The Puritan Richard Baxter once remarked, "I preach'd as never sure to preach again. I preach'd as a dying man to dying men."

Every generation of preachers is confronted with a new set of challenges, both intellectual and spiritual. For Baxter, that challenge was a world still settling itself after the upheaval of the Reformation and just beginning to experience the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment. For us, the challenge is somewhat different—a postmodern world in which truth has been deconstructed, therapy reigns, authority and texts have been discarded, and morality has been displaced in favor of therapeutic ways of thought. But even as we face different challenges in a different age, the world's need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ is just as urgent today as it was in Baxter's day—or Luther's, or Augustine's, or Paul's. The challenges we face may be different, but the sense of urgency in our preaching cannot be. Each of us must preach as a dying man to dying men. (R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*, 133)

In every generation, Satan remixes ancient lies into a new, intoxicating brew. Postmodernism is the brew currently being guzzled by many around us.

Certainly, many in church and culture may still be more affected by the scientific rationalism of modernism than the skeptical anti-foundationalism of postmodernism. And somewhere there is doubtless a new and growing post-postmodernism gathering speed and strength like a tropical depression in the south Atlantic. But even those in our pews who have never heard of postmodernism are impacted by it in more ways than they know.

Postmodern thinking creeps into our lives not necessarily through conscious choices but through a steady stream of bombardment via movies, magazines, song, and television. Our congregations gather each Sunday and nod at the appropriate spots in the sermon, but in their hearts many parishioners hold deep-seated beliefs and values more in

keeping with a postmodern worldview than a biblical one. (Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 15)

But while our hearers may not study the culture in which they live and breathe, preachers cannot afford such ignorance. As Haddon Robinson states in the Foreword to Johnston's book:

Let's face it. We don't teach the Bible. We teach *people* the Bible. As vital as it is to know content, it's not enough. We must know our audiences. . . . Christian communicators who want to know their audience must be aware of the culture that shapes them, motivates them, and often lures them away from God. (7)

Studying how to communicate to any prevailing culture is beset by dangers on two sides. On the one side is falling so in love with the culture and its patterns of communication that we don't recognize what in those patterns is deadly to gospel proclamation. Dean Inge's often-quoted maxim deserves to be repeated: "If you marry the spirit of your own age, you will be a widow in the next" (Quoted by John Stott in *Between Two Worlds*, 194). But it is equally dangerous to circle the church wagons and hunker down for a long siege, all the while longing for the halcyon homiletical days of the past. While marrying the spirit of the age may indeed render us a widow, refusing to learn how to speak to the current age may leave us a lonely spinster.

It's worthless to engage people and not bring them to face God's truth, and likewise, it is absurd to declare to the world "good news" with an indifference as to whether the listener responds. To lose either of these burdens results in not being heard or in having nothing to say. (Johnston, 19)

A seminary president from another denomination stated the challenge succinctly: "*How do we respond to [our culture] without playing into the hands of something that long term would be detrimental to preaching?*"

Seeking to answer that question is the focus of this issue of *Preach the Word*.

Confronting Moral Relativism

A first grade LES teacher I know almost lost a student. A long time “WELS family” took offense at something she taught. The offending teaching? The teacher stated that those who die without faith in Jesus spend eternity in hell. The perceived offense wasn’t the subtler sounding argument about whether this was appropriate fare for tender first grade ears. Instead, it was a denial that a loving God would judge anyone eternally.

Behind such denials often lurks a tolerant culture’s intolerance for labeling anything “sin.” The more “personal choices” are not categorized as evil, the more eternal judgment appears capricious. While moral relativism has always been a favorite fig leaf, rarely has the assault on concepts such as sin and guilt been so brazen and cynical. “Sin” is merely what those in power call what threatens their power. “Guilt” is a terrorist weapon.

Every claim to truth is subjected to an ever-suspicious critique, and every boundary between “right and wrong” and the “seemly and unrepresentable” is willfully transgressed, all in the steadfast pursuit of resisting the “terror” of modernist totalization. (David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 27)

Certainly there has been enough game playing even in the church with what is and isn’t sin (Pietism anyone?) to provide an incense-like aroma of plausibility to mask the sulfurous lie. But how do you address this from the pulpit? There are at least three unfortunate responses—two legalistic and one antinomian.

On the antinomian side is growing fearful to confront a tolerant age. The first hint of such fear tends to be the near-disappearance of any preaching about God’s wrath. This produces a curious case of dueling pulpits. God’s wrath is plainly proclaimed against godlessness from creation’s pulpit (Romans 1:18) while the preacher puts his finger to his lips as if to silence the clamor.

On the other side, the church can react to the pain that immorality brings to lives—such as disintegrating families—by making outward improvement of morals the primary purpose of preaching. Well-meaning pastoral hearts, empathizing with the suffering sin brings, seek to stanch the bleeding by applying outward pressure to the wound—cajoling moral behavior—rather than helping the wounded recognize that what’s really wrong is they are bleeding to death internally!

Preachers have a strategic advantage because consciences are vacillating wildly between blistering accusation and feeble defense.

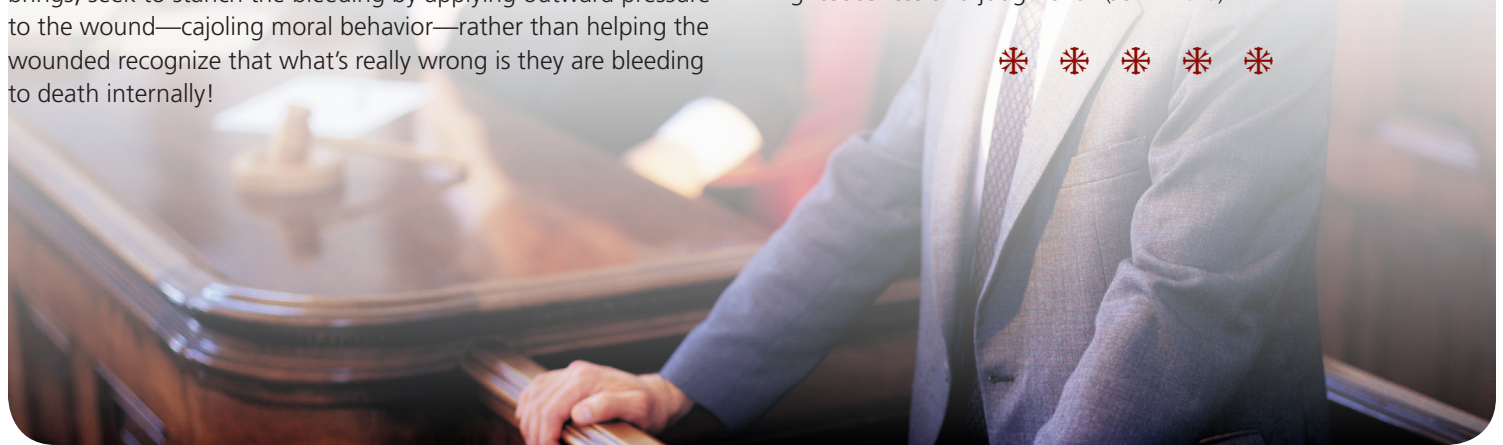
(Romans 2:15)

Then there’s the other reaction to moral relativism that at first looks like the courageous Lutheran path. That is the take-no-prisoners frontal assault that sees as pulpit task #1 to straighten out people’s definitions of sin and guilt. But this is not only a subtle confusion of catechesis and homiletics, it also clumsily signals to those with deficient definitions to close up their ears immediately. Have we forgotten that people are moral relativists chiefly with their tongues, not their hearts? We all know how easy it is to rationalize sin with our words, but how hard it is to believe our own propaganda. Preachers have a strategic advantage because consciences are vacillating wildly between blistering accusation and feeble defense (Romans 2:15).

Had the Law not been written on men’s hearts, no one would listen to the preaching of the Law. . . . People may revile it, yet they do so only with their mouths. What you say when preaching the Law to people is something that their own conscience is preaching to them every day. (Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 8-9)

Instead of inviting logical arguments by blustering about the logical fact that moral relativism is wrong, might there be greater wisdom in painting before them the reality of human depravity in the concrete images of daily life? Then we can proceed to show them the same reality mirrored in our text (or its context). Instead of attacking their philosophy, we will have confronted them with the Word’s authority. Long ago God provided concrete ways to expose the emptiness of every “-ism” of philosophical self-deception.

Our culture’s biggest need is not better definitions or more information about sin. What is needed is transformation—death and resurrection. Paint before the hearts of your hearers the wickedness of human sin and the gloriousness of divine mercy. God will handle the convicting and convincing. The Spirit still knows a thing or two about convicting the world of “sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8).



Maximizing the Culture's Love of Story

Want to see someone's eyes light up? Ask them about their favorite movie. Why do millions find movies so engaging? Movies thrive on the power of story. As we watch the movie, without anyone telling us to do so, we identify with someone in that movie. Even though screenwriters almost never directly address the movie audience (unless a postmodern screenwriter is playing with conventions!), they know how powerfully people are impacted as they identify with the story. At times church leaders have been so afraid of this power of stage and screen that they banned their people from frequenting such establishments.

How strange if we can recognize the power of story when used to sell billions of movie tickets, and yet fail to see the power of story when we stand in our pulpits. And not just any story, but God's story.

In a storied postmodern culture, many biblical preachers would do well to regain an appreciation of the beauty of biblical narrative. Preaching in a logical modern world often viewed Paul's epistles as the epitome of good communication and fashioned sermons from any genre of Scripture after the depth of his logical arguments. Preaching in a storied postmodern world needs to recapture the skill of telling biblical narrative and to look for the narrative beauty present in almost every genre of Scripture.

All of Scripture is at its heart the story of a jilted Lover who will not rest until he has brought his often-unfaithful bride back home—no matter what the cost to him!

All of Scripture is at its heart the story of a jilted Lover who will not rest until he has brought his often-unfaithful bride back home—no matter what the cost to him! The story begins with a garden paradise ruined and the path to the tree of life barred by flaming angelic guard (Genesis 3). It ends with eternal paradise restored, and a new tree of life readily available for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22). In between, the story is filled with twists and turns in which human sin seeks to cancel God's grace, but God's grace in Christ proves more resourceful (Romans 5:20). In our zeal to show an anarchic, relativistic, subjective world, that there is authoritative, unchanging, objective truth, we may squeeze the concrete life out of our text in order to display the abstract point of the text. That is shortsighted. We may comfort ourselves that we hold the logical high ground, but we may hold it alone. While the so-called new homiletic foolishly despaired of ever finding an objective point, it still did the preaching world a favor by trumpeting greater use of biblical narratives. We may argue with them when they, in true postmodern fashion, conclude that the experience of the journey replaces the destination, but

that doesn't render meaningless the storied journey on the way to biblical truth.

Here is how one pastor spoke about his personal journey back to enjoying preaching on biblical narrative for the sake of a storied culture.

God communicated to us by how he intervenes in the lives of people, and how by his Son he intervened in history. Making the story come alive is critical to communicating in this age. Again, I have changed the way I preach. I went from an exclusive logical, linear, "let me lay out some clear thinking for you" kind of preaching, to realizing now that I have to deal more with the narrative of Scripture and the life and narrative of people. I think at the beginning of my ministry I much preferred preaching epistles. And that is no longer true. In fact, I have come to love preaching the Old Testament. Even in the prophets, there is a narrative, and there are stories that sometimes are only hinted at in the Epistles.

I am convinced that right here a great leap forward in WELS preaching could happen almost overnight. It would occur if pastors would determine not to skip over a lively and engaging retelling of the biblical narrative found in the text or context. We too easily assume that people don't want to hear again the stories with which they are familiar. That errs in two directions: many no longer know the stories well, and those who do cherish hearing them again when they are told with imagination securely tied to the text.



Dealing with Growing Biblical Illiteracy

My wake-up call on the impact of biblical illiteracy was an interview with another seminary's academic dean. For years this seminary administered a test on basic biblical literacy to incoming students to identify the areas where a few would need remedial attention. In recent years, a super-majority of incoming students *failed* the entire exam.

If biblical illiteracy so impacted their incoming *theology* students, it would seem naïve to maintain that those occupying our pews—unchurched and churched—have escaped unscathed. Thankfully, interviews and survey revealed WELS pastors aren't preaching with their eyes closed.

We've been blessed in drawing people who haven't had a spiritual basis whatsoever, but that leaves a huge gap. I'm finding myself spending a lot more time explaining Bible stories and using Bible stories in my sermons. I can't just refer to Daniel in the lions' den; I tell the whole story.

In post-Christian America, this illiteracy has another challenging facet. Many are convinced they do understand the Bible and have pushed it away. But many push away a caricature.

Today's listeners . . . have a familiarity with elements of the Christian faith that has brought about a contempt. Who hasn't heard a televangelist on TV; or seen a billboard that reads JESUS SAVES AT THE DISCOUNT WAREHOUSE?

This saturation reduces Christianity to slogans and meaningless phrases. . . . They've heard it all before, and know what the church will say even before it speaks.

Sometimes we preachers prove them right. (Johnston, 19)

Here's another reason to break free from cliché-ridden law and gospel! We might shudder to know what hearers think we meant when we thoughtlessly repeat all too well-worn words and phrases.

So what's a fitting response to illiteracy?

- By all means do NOT dumb down sermons. Bryan Chapell urges us never to *overestimate* our hearers' vocabulary nor *underestimate* their intelligence.
- Don't shy away from challenging texts. The whole counsel of God is still the scope of preaching. Just don't deliver the whole load in a single sermon. Overcoming biblical illiteracy takes 20 *years*, not 20 *minutes*.
- Preaching today is not typically well served by resembling a doctrinal essay with numerous "proof texts." Since many hearers have no contextual understanding of the added passages, now they are confused by *multiple* texts! Also, proof-texting assumes that since the Bible

says it, it must be true. Scripture has convinced you of that, but some hearers aren't so sure. Deal thoroughly with text and context, use the text's implicit or explicit narrative to place your hearers into the sandals of the first hearers, and trust the text to establish its own authority. To paraphrase Spurgeon, don't defend the lion; turn him loose.

- What people need most is not to become experts in Bible trivia but to grasp how all Scripture centers in Jesus.

Our people can know so much, and yet know nothing, all at the same time. They can have a deep repository of biblical facts and stories, and yet know absolutely nothing about how any of it fits together, of why any of it matters beyond the wee little "moral of the story."

Even more, the moralistic fables that many evangelicals hear from their pastors week in and week out will not evoke the kind of burning-in-the-heart awe that two disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus. If we want our people to feel that kind of excitement about the gospel, then they need to hear and know the same sweeping story that Jesus unfolded to those two disciples.

"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets," Luke says, "he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Every single text of Scripture points to Jesus Christ. He is the Lord of all, and therefore He is the Lord of the Scriptures too. From Moses to the prophets, He is the focus of every single word of the Bible. Every verse of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him, and every story in the Bible ends with Him. That is what our people need to understand—that the Bible is not just a compendium of good short stories, but a grand, life-encompassing metanarrative of God's work of redemption in the world. (Mohler, 95-96)



Online Resources

Visit the *Proclaim Grace!* Web site (preaching.wlsce.net) for a discussion guide for this issue as well as sample sermons, book reviews, and further reading related to preaching to a storied postmodern culture.