

Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners

Graham Johnston

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“[Our hearers] are denizens of a culture they hardly understand, and in fact may not even realize is there....Yet 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)

These words are from Haddon Robinson’s foreword to Graham Johnston’s book, ***Preaching to a Postmodern World***. With that he summarizes the challenge every preacher faces as he steps up to preach. It is not enough just to know our text – as fundamental and primary as that is – we must also know our hearers. What is the degree of their familiarity or unfamiliarity with this part of the Word? What are the questions that will be on their minds as this text is read? What are the misunderstandings lurking in their minds that will distort what God is really saying in this text? In what direction is Satan at work in the prevailing winds of our culture to prevent them from applying this Word from their God to heart and life?

It is to help us to understand the questions we need to be asking as we prepare to preach – and the beginning of the answers - that Graham Johnston writes his book, ***Preaching to a Postmodern World***.

This book can be very helpful to the Lutheran preacher (more later), but there will be many places a Christ-centered Lutheran will cringe. Johnston, while writing to an Evangelical preaching audience, often sees some of the weaknesses of preaching among Evangelicals. He notes the danger in a moralistic tone in preaching which a postmodern culture will quickly dismiss as pharisaic. He points out the tendency to have been more impacted than they realize by the rationalism of modernism as sermons become overly cognitive rational arguments for faith in order to counter modernism’s rational arguments against faith. Yet Johnston never identifies a theological root of the problem. Arminian theology, by granting that fallen man possesses remnants of the image of God, opens itself up to an approach that quickly defaults to relying far too much on persuading with logical argument rather than proclaiming clear and specific law and gospel.

Other irritations in the book are more short-lived.

- On pages 84-85 Johnston suddenly levels a quick rebuke at preaching the liturgical year, while in several other places in his book he laments the lack of gospel focused preaching

in too many pulpits (see pages 101-102 for one example). That focus on Christ is precisely the strength of liturgical preaching when done well.

- On pages 94f Johnston laments “dogmatism” in preaching and how quickly it turns off a postmodern audience. However, what seems clear as you read is that what he is really aiming at is legalism and a refusal to see any challenges in making application of biblical truth to specific situations in life. In other areas of his book Johnston seems to give sufficient evidence that he understands that the last thing a cast-adrift no-absolutes postmodern culture needs is the church to cut herself adrift from God’s unchanging truth including doctrinal affirmations.
- Johnston’s discussion on preaching hell and judgment (p 112f) – while containing some useful elements for preaching God’s justice in a tolerant age – also quite evidently fails to make careful distinctions between law and gospel. He fails to see a legitimate use of the fear of judgment to help us crucify our old self. He believes that categorically means someone is trying to motivate behavior by threat rather than changing hearts with the gospel.
- On pages 162f Johnston reflects the early over-enthusiasm for projected visuals that marked many preaching books about a decade ago (Johnston’s book was published in 2001) that failed to give enough credit to the power of words to evoke rich imagery.
- On pages 167f, in urging the use of humor in the pulpit, Johnston fails to make the critical distinction between telling jokes (which is almost always out of place in the pulpit) and the appropriate use of humor (seeing the ironies and surprising revelations of life that can often bring a smile to our faces).

Yet despite these very real weaknesses, this book still has much to offer the careful reader.

- Johnston does an admirable job in chapter 1 (“Toto, We’re Not in Kansas Anymore”) and chapter 2 (Postmodernity: Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral?) of sketching the trends at work in the culture that surrounds us and our hearers. While there are some overstatements that can plague any brief attempt to summarize something as complex as popular culture, Johnston provides for any preacher a useful overview of the philosophical terrain surrounding our pulpit and our people.
- One of the most useful sections of all is found in chapter 5 (Obstacles) as he provides some very helpful ways for the preacher to check the assumptions that can creep unwittingly into our sermons. Those assumptions can provide large barriers to postmodern hearers in being able to follow along with us in our preaching. It is a bit sobering to realize how many barriers to understanding growing biblical illiteracy places in the path of our preaching. Rather than just bemoan that reality, Johnston provides some useful ways to check our assumptions at the pulpit steps. Here is one sample of

that assistance, as he uses and elaborates on four questions Elizabeth Achtemeier urges preachers to ask in the process of preparing a sermon:

- "What would my people doubt to be true in this text?" If listeners hear something read or stated that conflicts with their accepted view of reality without any explanation, listeners will conclude that you don't live in the same world as they do.
 - "What do my people need to know or be reminded of in this text?"
 - "With what inner feelings, longings, thoughts, and desires of my people does this text connect?" Questions two and three force the speaker to think about where the text touches the lives of listeners.
 - "If this text is true, what kind of world do we live in?" In taking time to address the underlying ideas of the text, the preacher gives listeners the information they need to process ideas on their own rather than accept ideas blindly; this conveys a respect for listeners who might not share a Christian worldview. (91-92)
- Also in chapter 5, Johnston helps us realize that Scripture is more than able to defend itself in the midst of the postmodern attack on authority. We don't have to hammer away at our hearers to convince them of the authority of Scripture before we can get God's message across. God's law and gospel as proclaimed carry with them the power to convince hearers of its truth, and thereby also its authority as the very words of God himself. Johnston puts it this way, "Allow the listener to experience firsthand the beauty and wisdom of God's written truth. People today are generally ignorant of what the Bible actually says. They think they know the biblical message based on slogans, quick summaries, and sound bites, but they don't. They are biblically clueless. The key rests in coaxing the listener to accompany the preacher on a journey, to sample the first taste of the Scripture's goodness." (90)

All in all, a Lutheran preacher reading through Johnston's book has much to gain. For all the times when for theological reasons we will find ourselves shaking our heads in disagreement, there will be significantly more times we will find ourselves with our eyes opened to understanding the challenge of preaching to hearers in a postmodern world.