



preaching Christ in a postmodern world

Over the last 30 years, there's been a perceptible shift in the way Australians think. Truth is increasingly no longer measured by what is objectively verifiable or reasonable. Reason has been replaced by experience. Opinion, rather than objective data has become the measure of truth, so what is true for you may not be true for me. It's all part of the movement that's been tagged "post-modernism." Dr Graham Cole, Principal of Ridley College Melbourne, has looked closely at the challenges post-modernism raises for Christianity. Perspective contributor JOHN DIACOS asked Graham how post-modernism should influence our approach to preaching Christ.

Perspective: Graham, in simple terms, how would you define post-modernity?

Graham: That's one of the key issues - how exactly do you define post-modernity? Probably the most famous definition is that of John Francois Lyotard: "incredulity towards meta-narratives". In other words, there is no big story and "reality" is defined in terms of who you are and where you are and when you are. The enlightenment or modernity could be seen as the religion of Reason. But post-modernity, for want of a better view, is a rejection of modernity's confidence in Reason. At the same time post-modernity continues the enlightenment's or modernity's rejection of the other big R, Revelation. Post-modernity champions a perspectival approach - that reality is matter of perspective.

Perspective: So fundamentally Post-Modernism is relativistic.

Graham: Yes, Richard Rorty, who's an American philosopher, thinks that "truth is what your friends let you get away with".

Perspective: Do you think Australia is becoming sufficiently post-modern, or

Jesus was preached differently in the synagogue to the way Paul preached on Mars Hill, for example. So too, our preaching needs to be aware that the entry point may differ from audience to audience. Although the end goal will be the same, ultimately we are to preach Christ and him crucified.

So in light of a post-modern audience, the preacher may change style in that he uses more illustrations and may appeal more to metaphors and images, but in the end still aims to present all mature in Christ as Paul did. So again the message is the same in the end but the entry point may be different.

Perspective: Should we take comfort from the fact that we now have a similar religious milieu into which the apostles preached the Gospel and wrote the NT?

Graham: In some way it means that I think that we may get a better hearing- we'll only get a better acceptance through the work of the Spirit of Christ- but we may get a better hearing because people are increasingly unfamiliar with Gospel so we have that advantage of its being fresh. I don't think there's ever an easy time to preach the Gospel outside of Eden. If you go back to last century, Kierkegaard thought his job was to re-introduce Christ to Danish Christianity, because although all the Churches were full, very few were Christians in his view. So he had a different kind of problem, but in the end he was thrown back upon reliance on the Spirit of God. I guess one temptation when we're proclaiming in a milieu which has a post-modern openness to discussing spiritual matters is to think that this will mean that people are necessarily more open to embracing the gospel. That's only theologically true if God decides that now is the time for a great harvest.

Perspective: So whereas people may be more open to Spiritual matters, they are also pluralistic.

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under the influence of Post-Modernism, that requires us to alter the way we preach?

Graham: I think the influence of Post-modern ways of thinking is everywhere. It's debated in the Universities. It's there in popular culture. It's in films and popular music. So, I think it has increasing influence. As for altering the way we preach, I think we need to be more sensitive that we have audiences now which are shaped this way. The apostles were audience sensitive, and so

Graham: Yes that's right. And often they are very happy for you to have your beliefs.

Perspective: So if people are interested more in the questions of "What will work?" rather than "What is true?", how does that effect preaching?

Graham: I think that means that if you're preaching to a mixed audience, people affected by modernity and post-modernity, you will need to make room in your preaching for stories. Additionally there may be need to do cultural apologetics, which addresses the questions raised in film and music etc. There'll also need to be an appeal to reason, not only because there will be people there still shaped by modernity, whose question will be "Does Christianity make sense?", but because we want to address the concerns of the whole person. So we need not only to talk about the benefits of the Gospel, we also have to talk about the truth of it. So it's not an either/or, as people need to be convinced of the reality of what the doctrine is about as well as the truth of the doctrine.

Perspective: So you're saying we should introduce more stories into the way we preach. There was some criticism of the recent *Walking with Dinosaurs* series that screened on the ABC, for the way it set the computer generated dinosaurs within a life story, all of which is pure speculation. The response from the producers was that stories made the show more appealing because they engage us as human beings at some deeper level than just a list of facts. You seem to be saying the same thing about preaching in a post-modern world. What is it about stories that appeal to us?

Graham: That's an interesting question. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel prize winning author said "God created man because he loves stories". I don't think it's any accident that the meta-narrative of Scripture is just that- a big story. Because I think that one of the defining characteristics of a person is to have a story. I have a story, therefore I am. So in the light of that, I think the story form resonates with the kind of being we are, and therefore it's no accident that revelation doesn't come to us in a

systematised form but in a story form. Stories are how we know who we are because persons have stories to them.

What I'd be reticent about doing is just imaginatively reconstructing Biblical stories, which is I think the problem with *Walking with Dinosaurs* - how do you know they're really those colours? So when I talk about more story, it's about telling our stories that echo, resonate, exemplify the Biblical story, rather than pursuing an imaginary task of trying to work out how Nicodemus felt before coming to Jesus by night.

Perspective: It's always the problem with the word 'story', that people assume it to be fictitious.

Graham: That's the problem: that at the popular level story and myth seem to be interchangeable.

Perspective: So on the basis that preaching to Post-Moderns involves an appeal to our own story, does that make it even more important than before that the preacher's life be consistent with their message?

Graham: Yes that's a good point. I think that's vital. It's no accident that when Paul defends his apostleship in 2 Cor 10-13 he tells personal stories of what he had suffered for Christ at that time- and that's the most self-revealing of any document in the whole Bible, maybe with the exception of Jeremiah. I think it's an important part of our communication these days- however not in the way where we are at centre stage. Because we live in a world that so many authority figures have let us down, when something of our personal stories coming through, where appropriate, those stories help answer a certain scepticism that has arisen about preachers over the years. No accident then that Paul catalogues his weaknesses when he tells his stories over against those false apostles who boast of their power. I think it's good to be transparent to our hearers in the same way.

Perspective: So people don't just want to know the rational basis of what we believe, but how it affects our lives as well.

Graham: That's right, I think that's really important because that's where our story

resonates with the Great Story - we were dead and are now alive.

Perspective: Why is it that my experience should be more convincing than my reason? If rational arguments can be dismissed as being true for you but not true for me, why can't story?

Graham: I think many people will say that- "well I'm happy for you, but as for me, my experience is different". So I don't think it's an either/or. After all, all experience needs to be presented in some story form with a beginning and an end. It also needs to be accompanied with an appeal to reason. Stories need quality control of some kind. But in the end, an interesting thing about advocates of Post-Modernism is that they happily appeal to reason first, usually presenting an argument for their relativism. So there's a kind of self-referential destructiveness about a position that says absolutely no absolutes, never have been, never will be! But I think you need to realise that ultimately God must persuade people, regardless of whether the instrumentality is arguments or stories or whatever.

Perspective: Now of course some of our listeners will be modernist and some post-modernist. How can we appeal to both in our preaching?

Graham: I think I'd try to present both the story element and the argumentative element when we preach. I wouldn't have an either/or, but both/and here, but with the story element as a subset of the expounded meaning of Scripture, rather than the other way around.

Perspective: So what are some of the dangers to avoid?

Graham: One danger is, having identified people as post-modern, that we then rely on techniques instead of recognising that it is by grace that people are saved. That's a very modernist error, using a technique in that way, and not recognising that it is God who raises the dead. It's what I call the technocratic fallacy: namely, that once we have the technique to communicate to post-moderns, then all will be well.

Another danger is that we can become too our-story focused, and we end up preaching ourselves rather than Christ, doing the very reverse of what Paul said.

A third danger is only speaking of the reality of what we can experience in our lives through Christ. When John's Gospel talks about truth we find that Jesus is the truth in that he is real (for example, the true/real way), but also that he is full of words that are the truth.

So there are three dangers to avoid. We need to talk in terms of both truth and reality like John's Gospel does.

Perspective: Has your preaching changed?

Graham: I think my evangelistic preaching has changed. I feel a need to talk about films, which are now more the universal language than music. I am also more aware that people should know me. So I like to be interviewed before I preach evangelistically. How I introduce what I am going to say and the illustrative material I am going to use have changed too.

I think we have to wrestle as preachers with both the meaning and significance of the Bible. I was very well taught in theological college to ask what a passage means, but not as well taught on how to draw out (application/implication) the significance (importance/value) of that meaning for today. If we never tackle the significance question then our hearers won't know why they should bother with the Bible today.

Perspective: In "The Gagging of God", Don Carson recommends a slightly different approach. Whilst Don is saying we should modify our methods, he is much more emphasising a 'damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead' approach- that we ought to critique the post-modern view, know the truth and preach it boldly, and above all set the Bible within its Biblical theological context- ie establish a Christian world view that is lacking in our post-modern world. How far would you go along with that?

Graham: I think that's a very good approach if you have an audience you know will come back, say 5 times in 5 days. From memory, Don is speaking out of an experience of speaking at a mission on a University campus. But it is different when you only have one go at the audience, as I had when I recently spoke at a 'Christmas in July' in an RSL club. I think a lot depends on the nature of the

opportunity you have. Ravi Zacharias, on University campuses gives a lesson in logic, so that people will know the truth-value of his specifically Christian talks. But those sorts of opportunities are not going to be our normal lot.

Perspective: Finally, what books would you recommend for busy preachers on Post Modernism?

Graham: I think a little book edited by Walter T. Anderson, *The Truth about the Truth*, is worth having. Its a secular book and it includes extracts from post-modern authors in it, like the Derridas and the Foucaults and so on, plus some of their secular critics too. So, if you're going to read one source on Post-modernism, this is the one to have. You can read Don Carson, *The Gagging of God* - anything by Don is worth reading. The little book, *Postmodernism for Beginners* is another secular book, which is quite good. Phillips and Okholm's *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* also has some very useful essays.