

## PREACHING IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Modernity: the “Age of Reason” (as opposed to that “of Faith”); that period beginning with the Enlightenment that is animated by the conviction that through diligent application of human reason the world can be described, understood, and harnessed to the benefit of all.

Postmodernity: less a defined “movement” than a general attitude – one of skepticism – which has permeated a variety of disciplines and the culture at large about the verity of received traditions, particularly those of modernity!

The \$2.50 Word for the Day: *Foundation* = the unquestioned assumptions of a community about what is undeniably and self-evidently true which serve to a) foster social cohesion around basic values and b) provide a standard by which to assess between competing truth claims.

### Thematic Overview: What is *Reality*? What is *Truth*?

	Modernity	Postmodernity
<i>Narrative</i>	There is one story – called <i>Reality</i> – that is <i>True</i> ; all others are either fictive or false. Scientific method and reason are the means by which we determine the “true” story.	There are many stories, none of which can be <i>proven</i> to be true. The story we never question (i.e. “reality”) is our “standard story” (or metanarrative) by which we judge all other stories.
<i>Language</i>	There is one Reality that language mirrors, describes and represents. Language is a tool that reflects reality.	“Reality” is a social construction. Language (and culture) are the means by which we produce reality. Language does not simply reflect our experience but creates it; we cannot experience what we cannot name.
<i>Truth</i>	Truth is something that lives “out there” – the same in all places and times – waiting to be discovered, described, and applied	Truth is simply the name we apply to those things the dominant culture has tacitly agreed to; it is a social construction that cannot be proved and often has been disproved.
<i>Power</i>	Power comes from aligning oneself with reality/truth. Francis Bacon: “knowledge is power.”	Those in power name/determine reality/truth. Michel Foucault: “power is knowledge.”
<i>Rhetoric</i>	Not to be trusted; inferior to the scientific method. At best a means to argue for one position over the other; at worst the means by which to make “the worse appear the better.”	All we really have; if “reality” and “truth” are social constructions, then rhetoric provides the means by which to come to consensus about the community’s most deeply held convictions.
<i>Humanity</i>	<i>Homo Sapien Sapiens</i> – thinking, reflective beings; we live by reason.	<i>Homo Narrans</i> – narrative beings, we make sense of our lives through story.
<i>Authority</i>	Lodged in institutions and experts: <i>logocentric</i> .	Lodged in experience & relationship: <i>ethocentric</i> .

## Consequences & Challenges

- Truth is replaced by “value” and “meaning.”
- Reality (including the “self”) is socially constructed and therefore what is given or presented as “real” must always be questioned.
- Everything (truth, meaning, self) is radically contextual – makes sense only in context and is dependent on “the other.”
- Meaning is experienced in and through relationship.
- All claims to ultimate, universal truth are viewed with suspicion.

## Opportunities

- Truth is confessed and professed but never possessed – we live, again, by faith alone.
- We do not have to prove our position to have it validated – we live by faithful confession.
- We can value those who are different because they help us to know ourselves – no more coercion.
- Bible is a collection of confessions that still have power to shape our lives – indeed, to bring us through death to new life! As a consequence, there is no need to “prove” the Bible is true; instead we are called to be shaped by it and, in turn, witness to it.
- Christianity is *one* narrative of how the world works that we are to describe vividly and into which we are called to invite others.

## Preaching

- The task is to make alive, imaginable, and thereby “real” the confessions of the biblical witness that they may speak in and to our present context.
- A means by which to immerse hearers in the biblical story and world view that they may make sense of their lives, hopes, questions, etc. in light of the claims of the Bible and Church. (Present-day Christian community lives somewhere between Acts and Revelation.)
- Requires preachers to
  - Be invested in what they say
  - Articulate their (and the church’s) beliefs as convictions, not proofs
  - Respect the right of the hearer to question, wonder about, and also believe what is being said
- Puts the burden of “conversion” on the Holy Spirit.
- Doctrine valued for its “explanatory power” not as “repository of truth”
- Values the relational dimension of the gospel and of confessing and preaching; hence
  - calls into question “technological preaching” and “entertainment evangelism”
  - there is a premium on the perceived trustworthiness of the preacher (*ethos*)

## Pop-culture Resources

Films: *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show*, *Dogma*, *Contact*, *Pulp Fiction* (violent), *Big Fish*

Books: W.T. Anderson, *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be*

## Theological Perspectives on Postmodernity

S. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*; R. Allen, S. Johnston, B. Blaisdell, *Theology for Preaching*;

D. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*