PREACHING THAT CONNECTS

1. EXTERNAL CONNECTIONS:
STRATEGY AND RESOURCES

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I. NEGATIVES OF PREACHING

I don’t suppose that it has ever been easy to be a faithful and effective biblical preacher. It has always been difficult to discover motivated and passionate servants of God, who will see this as their life’s work, rather than merely an aspect of a wide-ranging, but often diffuse and unfocused ministry package. It has been difficult for those who are motivated to remain consistent to the commitment in the light of the time it takes, the constant hard work it involves, and the frequent lack of response, let alone appreciation, among the hearers. It has been difficult to address an often hostile world and an indifferent, apathetic church in a way which engages, instructs, rebukes, corrects, encourages, and trains in righteousness those who have ears to hear, as they are taught with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim 3:16). It has been and it still is.

Put the dip-stick into Western church history and read a book published in 1592 by the English Puritan William Perkins, entitled *The Art of Prophesying* ("preaching" we would say). Perkins laments the scarcity of faithful Bible-preaching ministers, a truth, he says, which is self-evident from the experience of all ages. Few men of ability seek the calling of the ministry, and of those with that honorable title, very few deserve the names of messenger and interpreter. As another later Puritan, John Milton, would put it, “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed.” Perkins traces this to three causes:

1. What he calls the “contempt” with which the calling is treated—biblical ministry is hated by the world because it reveals sin and unmasks hypocrisy.

2. The difficulty of discharging the duties. Perkins gives due regard to the fact that the care and cure of souls, to speak to

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God and on his behalf to the people, is an overwhelming and awesome responsibility.

3. The inadequacy of financial recompense and equivalent social status. Who would accept such contempt and such difficulties for such a meager reward?

Instead, Perkins says, the sharpest minds of our day turn to the law. And that was 1592! Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose! Is that what you're training for? Contempt, difficulties, and relative impoverishment? The Apostle Paul would certainly relate to that. Listen to his testimony to the Corinthians.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. (1 Cor 4:9-13)

That is the apostolic succession we stand in as Christian preachers. The well-paid and comfortable local church pastorate in the U.S. or the U.K. is in world and historical terms an exception rather than the norm.

But we are, of course, no strangers to these challenges, even if their fabric and presentation are different in our twenty-first century. We know that it isn’t easy; that faithful biblical preaching will never go unchallenged, since it is the most powerful weapon in God’s armory; and that the more faithfully and effectively this ministry is exercised, the more the forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil will conspire to silence God’s Word and take out God’s messenger. After all, we are following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus.

Do you remember Luke’s account of the synagogue sermon Jesus preached in Nazareth at the commencement of his public ministry? You can refresh your memory in Luke 4:16-32. The account establishes that Jesus was an expository preacher. He chooses a text from Isaiah 61 which focuses the priority of his ministry as proclamation and declares himself to be the fulfillment of the prophecy, in himself. Here is Christ preaching Christ from OT Scripture. But Jesus does not only interpret Isaiah, he also interprets the Nazareth congregation—“I tell you the truth; no prophet is accepted in his home town” (v. 24). It’s as though the sermon takes the shape of an ellipse with twin focal points—the biblical text and the condition, or situation, of the hearers. It is the particular Nazarene focus and application which Jesus introduces by his use of
one of their contemporary proverbs, "Physician, heal yourself!" (v. 23). At one level his message is well received. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips" (v. 22a), but at the deeper level there is profound rejection. "Isn't this Joseph's son? they asked" (v. 22b). So Jesus then uses Scripture to interpret Scripture. First Kings 17 and 2 Kings 5 are brought into play. The narrative of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, followed by the healing of the Syrian general Naaman's leprosy, through Elisha, are used to expose the incipient unbelief of the Nazarenes in contrast to the Gentile world, which the good news of Christ will eventually reach and transform. The fury of his hearers and their determination to drive him out of the town are predictable consequences to Christ's uncompromising biblical exposition. Was it a successful sermon? Drummed out of town? Oh yes, totally effective. He went on to Capernaum where they were amazed at his teaching because his message had authority (v. 32). Faithful ministry hardens as well as softens hearts. This theme runs all the way through the synoptic accounts of Christ's ministry. Since all authentic ministry derives from Christ alone, we should expect no other reactions to our service.

The great lesson for us is that Jesus did not ignore the reaction of his hearers. He anticipated, exposed, and reacted to it. He connected: this was no abstract communication of information. His exposition of Isaiah electrified his hearers, so that neutrality became an impossibility. He knew God's Word of promise, and he knew the hearts of his listeners, and he became, in himself, the connection between the two. Preaching that connects is the produce of a preacher who connects—it is deeply personal and individual. This perhaps explains why in Paul's letters to Timothy, with all their instruction on ministry skills and content, the overwhelming emphasis is on the quality and character of "the man of God" rather than on his abilities or gifts. The content of the message and the appropriateness of the methodology both matter greatly. But this third dimension of the minister, who not only communicates but embodies what he says, we are very liable to devalue, or even ignore. Yet what we are shouts so loudly that people often cannot hear what we say. And this is especially the case in the midst of all the relativistic uncertainties of our post-modern twenty-first century culture.

It is time to explore some of the distinctives of our time and place which challenge our own ability to be effective expositors of God's Word. In a recent article entitled "Responding to the Post-Modern Mind," published in the summer 2007 issue of Affinity "Table Talk" in the U.K., the Christian sociologist Rob Tyler asks how we are to reach a post-modern culture without compromising biblical truth or alienating our culturally-conditioned hearers. He outlines eight characteristics of post-modernity which are most pertinent (and challenging) to the truth claims of the Bible and its
contemporary expositors. His listing, in briefest summary, is as follows:

1. Rejection of meta-narratives—any theory or claim to be able to explain everything.
2. Anti-foundationalism—the view that there are no indisputable criteria by which to judge the truth or falsity of any belief system.
3. Anti-totalization—"because we cannot know everything about a topic, it is arrogance to claim any kind of truth because more can always be added."
5. Eclecticism—this is the pick and mix mentality which "allows and encourages the mixing of different internally valid ideas to create new ones."
6. Media-Saturation.
7. Individualism—incessant choosing, living how you wish, infinite choice, and self-expression.
8. Consumption encourages style at the expense of substance.

I commend the whole paper to you, obtainable at www.affinity.org.uk, but these headings in themselves serve to summarize and focus the multiple challenges to connect, faced by the contemporary expositor.

They are especially urgent when we think of evangelistic preaching, but we are no longer in a position to separate the gospel from the nurture of the saints. Unbelievers are increasingly hesitant about coming to presentations which they know to be evangelistic, fearing the hard-sell, the manipulative emotional ride, or the sign-up, give your money club-membership approach which they anticipate as the purpose of the exercise. They are much more likely to visit on a regular Sunday, anonymously and unannounced, so that they will experience a regular sermon and determine their response from that.

Although my second lecture will deal more with pastoral preaching and therefore with internal preaching connections to our fellow believers, we would be naïve not to realize that our church family is equally affected by the post-modern air we all breathe. The regular Sunday congregation has the virus deeply at work within personal, family, and professional life-contexts, as well as in our relationships with one another as the people of God. Indeed, the debates currently raging within wider evangelical circles about the nature of contemporary preaching are proof positive of this fact. The questions which are being posed (and need to be) all represent different strands in the weave of ideas as to how we are to face the challenges of producing consistently faithful, biblical, God-honoring preaching to a culture that is essentially post-modern and potentially extremely hostile to both our message and our methods.
Let me try to outline the issues in a series of questions, not falsely to dichotomize differing views, but to represent the spectrum of responses on offer.

**Question One:** What is the preacher's task? Or, what is the sermon's vision statement? The broad evangelical spectrum represents a continuum of opinion from understanding propositional truths (objective, cognitive, intellectual) to experiencing God (subjective, intuitive, holistic). To some extent this reflects the old conservative/charismatic divide with which we have had to live for the past forty years or more. But those traditionally exegetical, doctrinal, or even experiential differences seem to be losing significance. The new interest, easily visible on the websites of so-called emergent churches, for example, is much more stylistic, sensory-driven, preoccupied with creating "ethos" or "atmosphere" or "sense." One church (Ecclesia Church in Houston, Texas) defines its meetings as being about "experiencing the beauty of the Christian faith" and helping each other to "embrace the reality of Christ." If this is what church is about, it will profoundly affect the leaders' views on and practice of preaching.

Assuming that the Bible is still regarded as the authoritative Word of God—a key distinction of evangelicalism—the debate focuses on how that truth functions in today's truth-evacuated culture, and what it means to understand the Bible and receive its truth. For many conservative evangelicals, the Bible is a truth repository, to be organized systematically and theologically, and Christian growth is in some part understanding more truths and more of the truth already believed. This can easily degenerate into an almost exclusively educational model (reinforced by seminary training) in which preaching is closely akin to lecturing. The warning bells should ring when we remember the old saying that "a lecture is that process by which information is transferred from the lecturer's notes to the students' notes, without passing through the mind of either party!" For some, the Bible has only a few mega truths (perhaps only one—what it means to be in relationship with God) and Christian growth happens as the awareness and practice of these few truths or this one truth, deepens. But for an increasing number, the Bible's truth is a journey, into which God invites each of us individually and which leads us to the heart of God and to a true knowledge of ourselves. Christian growth is about travelling that pathway and preaching best helps us by sharing the stories of fellow-travelers, whether biblical or contemporary.

**Question Two:** If the preacher's task is to connect us to God, what style of presentation is likely to do that most successfully today? The most popular answer appears to be narrative preaching, though as with all such terms, it seems to embrace a range of meanings. In Green and Pasquarello's book *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching*
it is explained as "getting ourselves into the world produced by Scripture." They continue,

In preparing this sermon, the basic question I have asked has not been "How can I make this ancient book interesting or useful for modern listeners?" but rather, "What is this story doing to change our thinking, willing and living as God's people?"

The preaching must enable us to enter the biblical narrative, to join the journey. Extending the concept, Dieter Zander, founder of one of the first Generation X churches, comments, in an interview on www.freshministry.org, "I usually start with something going on in my life or people's lives. I usually start with my strand or their strand, then I bring in God's strand." We need to see ourselves in the story if the preaching is really going to connect. Such preaching is often contrasted with those point traditional sermons on the grounds that life cannot be reduced to such formulae. If truth is primarily to be experienced and not just understood, then narrative preaching leaves ideas open-ended and asks more questions than providing solutions. It is much less directive. It invites participation in the stories (whether biblical or other) which the preacher (storyteller) is weaving and so the hearer engages with the preacher and hopefully with God. We join the journey.

It has to be said that this both springs from, and reinforces, the idea that the preacher's task is to make the Bible relevant to the hearers. There is the objective difficulty of how text millennia old can speak to us today, which is allied to the subjective criticism and complaint that what the church has to say to today's generation is anachronistic and therefore irrelevant. There is, however, plenty of evidence that this leads to a superficial treatment of the biblical text, since the text is only useful as a springboard into the more relevant agenda of the sermon, which can then move in any number of different directions, when once it is set free from its exegetical and contextual constraints.

**Question three:** Is there anything unique, or even special, about preaching? What would we lose if the concept were to be changed, or perhaps abandoned? The web provides a wide variety of one-stop shop sites for sermon preparation. Everything is available from the outlines, major points, suggested applications, illustrations, quotations, tips on how to be interesting, jokes, and the list goes on. All the pastor has to do is download and present or perform. The websites frequently carry quality materials and it is clear that the sponsors are well intentioned, even hoping to promote biblical preaching by providing their smorgasbord of attractive options. In the current context, with the demand on pastors to be all things, from managers to counselors, from consultants to fund raisers, it is hardly surprising that personal study and creative sermon preparation time is easily used up elsewhere and talks are
reproduced much as school teachers might reproduce lessons, in the classroom.

Allied to this, there has been a great deal of modern educational research into learning styles, which constantly erodes confidence in preaching as a methodology. Ironically, this is especially true in the ranks of the professional communicators, the teachers, trainers, and coaches within the congregation. For them the visual and the participatory win hands down every time over the verbal and passive. Compared with the discovery and discussion methods of the classroom, the pulpit monologue (so-called) can appear outmoded and ineffective. Multi-media presentations look much more exciting than preaching. Visual images and sound-bites are much easier to recall than reasoned arguments and careful persuasion. So why bother with preaching any longer? It isn’t cost-effective. It isn’t really working. There must be better ways to connect.

I have deliberately spent this first part of my presentation on the negatives associated with preaching today, among Bible-believing evangelical Christians and churches, because I want us to be one hundred percent realists, to feel the pressures and recognize the true nature of the challenges, since so much is at stake for the future of the gospel in the Western world. Unless we develop our convictions in response to the reality of this skeptical and critical analysis, they will not be adequate to see us through the current storm, nor will they be the guiding light we desperately need both for our present practice and our future ministries.

Now in the second half of what I want to say, I turn to the strategy and resources we need to understand and embrace, if we are to prove to be sufficient for these things, as stewards of God’s unchanging truth.

II. STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

A. Preach the Word!

My first conviction is rooted in the very existence and nature of that Word of Truth, the Holy Scriptures. Expository biblical preaching means that the Bible is in the driver’s seat; it dictates both the content and the course of the sermon. In many churches, and in the sermons preached in them, the Bible is in the trunk, hidden away, largely forgotten, effectively irrelevant. In others, it is a passenger in the back seat, like any back seat driver offering advice, usually to the irritation of the man behind the wheel. If our evangelicalism is anything more than nominal, we are not likely to fall for these mistakes. But frequently the Bible is in the passenger seat—up front where the action is, useful for observation of the road, map reading and navigation, an interesting conversationalist, but not driving the car. The preacher is doing that and the Bible serves his
purposes. But in expository preaching the Bible does the driving and the preacher is captive to the text. The preacher takes the Bible at face value. He wants to read it for all its worth, and so he is committed to any amount of hard work to understand it properly, to get it right. Every expositor starts with the premise that God must be the perfect communicator, so to understand what he is saying, what Paul called “rightly handling the Word of Truth,” is supremely important. That is how preacher and hearers alike will hear God’s authentic voice today. The word of the preacher lasts for five minutes, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. So when the Bible is preached, God’s voice is heard, because the Bible is the word of God and alternative authoritative texts do not exist—not even our sermon notes, and not even when they are on PowerPoint!

Do you see how this conviction, worked out consistently in practice, immediately leads to a second derivative conviction about the necessity and supreme importance of expository preaching? In Karl Barth’s definition in his Homiletics,

Preaching is the attempt enjoined upon the Church to serve God’s own Word, through one who is called thereto, by expounding a Biblical text in human words and making it relevant to contemporaries, in intimation of what they have to hear from God Himself.

That lifts the bar, doesn’t it? You see, it’s not that there is anything defective about the divinely authorized methodology (“Preach the Word,” 2 Tim 4:2), but a great deal lacking in its contemporary practice and, we have to admit to our shame, in us as the responsible practitioners. A surgical procedure may be well-documented with a great track-record of effective treatment, but it still needs the hands of a skilled surgeon to operate beneficially. And skills like that are not picked up in a half hour’s browsing the internet.

If we are going to connect with post-modernity, so that individuals actually start to want to hear the Bible preached, it will not be by preaching being just one of the things I “do,” but by it becoming the heart-beat, the indispensable core of everything else in my ministry.

But I often hear busy pastors argue like this. “I’m not especially gifted as a preacher. Others can do it much better than I can and, anyway, all the study that is required exacts a price, in terms of time, I just can’t afford. It really isn’t cost-effective. So I go to one of the websites, download a really good sermon, tweak it a bit with a story or two of my own and serve it up as a ‘ready meal’ for my congregation.” Not long ago I visited a church when we were away and heard one of my own sermons, reheated, points and all, and given the circumstances, not badly done! So what’s wrong with that? A great deal, I would suggest, though there is nothing new under the sun! Do you know that old limerick about Charles Haddon
Spurgeon, the great Baptist pastor, the prince of nineteenth century preachers in London, whose printed sermons circled the globe?

There once was a preacher called Spurgy
who had little time for liturgy
but his sermons are fine
and I use them as mine
and so do the rest of the clergy!

But the fault is that the Word isn’t in the preacher because the preacher isn’t in the Word. So instead of heart-to-heart proclamation, you have a ministry of performance. The preacher has become the actor, and the actor dissembles, he plays a part, he wears a mask, he is literally a hypocrite. It may be very much culturally-approved and even applauded, but it is bereft of power because it is barren of God’s presence.

In contrast, listen to John Calvin in his sermon on 1 Tim 3:2 “Apt to Teach”:

For St Paul does not mean that one should just make a parade here or that a man should show off so that everyone applauds him and says, “Oh! Well-spoken! Oh! What a breadth of learning! Oh! What a subtle mind!” All that is beside the point. . . . When a man has climbed up into the pulpit, is it so that he may be seen from afar, and that he may be pre-eminent? Not at all. It is that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man.

Elsewhere, he develops the idea like this.

It is certain that if we come to church we shall not hear only a mortal man speaking but we shall feel, even by God’s secret power, that God is speaking to our souls, that he is the teacher. He so touches us that the human voice enters into us and so profits us that we are refreshed and nourished by it.

I take both quotes from T. H. L. Parker’s book, Calvin’s Preaching, first published in 1992. No wonder, Bishop J. C. Ryle, first bishop of Liverpool in England, in the nineteenth century, commenting on Matt 4:17, “From that time on Jesus began to preach . . .” stated that, “The brightest days of the church have been those when preaching has been honoured. The darkest days of the church have been those when it has been lightly esteemed.” There can be no doubt as to which days we find ourselves living in.

The biblical preacher’s first conviction then is that his great and only necessary resource, in terms of the content of his message and indeed its focus and purpose is nothing less than “the living and enduring Word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). It is the Word that will do the work, because the Spirit of God still takes the Word of God to do the work of God and to create the people of God. It is the biblical text, in its context, which will provide both the sermon’s theme and its aim.
Until the preacher connects with its meaning and significance personally, he has nothing to say. 

But that unchanging, eternal truth has to be conveyed into the maelstrom of modern life, to connect with a lost world in headlong rebellion against its maker, in a revolutionary and life-changing encounter. The situation is precisely similar to that of the apostles in the pluralism and relativism of first-century Greco-Roman culture, religion, and philosophy. Many scholars have remarked that our present cultural situation is more akin to that early church environment than we have been for many centuries past.

B. Engage the World!

So our second conviction must be that it is the preacher’s privilege and responsibility to relate as precisely as possible the truth of the divine revelation to the particular circumstances of human rebellion, peculiar to this moment in history. This is not to capitulate to the agenda of the culture, either ideologically or in terms of method. But it is to ensure that there is a connection which God can and will use to undermine the arrogance of this generation’s rebellion against him.

Paul makes the point in 2 Cor 10:3-5. They are magnificent words!

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

The resources which are sufficient for this strategy have been clearly identified at the beginning of the first letter.

Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:22-24)

And again,

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Cor 2:2-5)

When we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, we see these foundation principles fleshed out in action, in the reality of Paul’s
proclamation ministry. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, it incites opposition, usually in the form of mob violence. In Acts 17-19 there are accounts of a riot in Thessalonica (17:5), agitation in Berea (17:13), abusive opposition in Corinth (18:6), a united attack and legal charges (18:12), beating up a new believer (18:17), and a great civil commotion and riot in Ephesus (19:23ff.). These are the weapons of the world, designed to hinder free speech, to intimidate and threaten, to compel submission at the expense of personal liberty and safety. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world." The contrast is very deliberately drawn by Luke in the verbs he chooses to describe the apostolic ministry. In Thessalonica Paul reasoned, explained, and proved, and he proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ (17:2-3). In Berea "they examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (17:11). In Corinth, Paul reasoned, trying to persuade (18:4). At Ephesus, he reasoned with the Jews (18:19). spoke boldly, arguing persuasively (19:8) and then, when publicly maligned, "had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (19:9). In all these ways, Luke comments, the whole province of Asia "heard the word of the Lord" (19:10). These are the weapons invested with divine power to pull down the strongholds of ignorance and rebellion against the knowledge of God and his claims, revealed in Jesus Christ.

But the clearest picture of all, which is also arguably the most relevant for us today, is in the famous address by Paul to the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens (17:16-34). This is not the place for a detailed expository analysis and many such helpful commentaries exist, but it is highly instructive to see the demolition power of God's revelation in the apostle's hands as the strongholds of Athenian intellectual and religious culture come under siege. Paul's technique is to deliver three demolition blows to what he is not afraid to call "such ignorance" (17:30). As so often in the NT, the truth is taught by negatives. The heresies which afflicted the young churches are the generators of the apostles' articulation of the gospel truth. So here, the ignorance of man-made religion is deconstructed before their eyes, so that the reality of the living God can be proclaimed in all his rescuing power.

The bridge is built, the connection made, by means of the self-confessed ignorance of the Athenian altar inscription, "To an unknown God" (v. 23). Paul has something to proclaim to them, something to contribute to their knowledge and understanding, but which will actually undermine their pluralism. So here are the three negatives which act as demolition blows. (1) God does not live in temples built by hands (v. 24). (2) He is not served by human hands as if he needed anything (v. 25). (3) He is not far from each one of us (v. 27).

The mystique of man-made religion is exploded in a few crisp sentences. But each demolition blow is also the means of teaching the true revelation of the only living God. God does not live in temples
made by human beings. He made and rules the world for human beings to live in. God does not need human gifts or service. He gives all men life and breath and everything else needed for our life in this world, including our ethnicity, geographical context, and history (v. 26). God is not far away and therefore unknowable. He made us in his image and we can know him personally, so we are not to remake him in ours, for the living God is not like gold or silver or stone; he is not an image made by man’s design and skill (v. 29). This is biblical deconstructionism. Paul uses revelation to explore the fallacy and undermine the plausibility of the culture. We should do the same.

In our case, of course, post-modernism is itself supremely deconstructionist, as we have noted. In many ways it is philosophically the grandchild of Nietzsche whose famous assertion that there are no truths but only interpretations has come to fruition across the contemporary scholarly scene. But as the British philosopher, Roger Scruton, points out, “Nietzsche’s utterance is blatantly paradoxical, since it can be true only if it isn’t,” but that paradox is concealed within the jargon of post-modernity. At the heart of the post-modern attack on the truth content of biblical Christianity lies the multicultural agenda that requires us to be open to everything and wedded to nothing. As Scruton observes,

> The inescapable result of this is relativism: the recognition that no culture has any special claim to our attention, and that no culture can be judged or dismissed from outside. But once again there is a paradox. For those who advocate this multicultural approach are, as a rule, vehement in their dismissal of Western culture.

We might add especially Christian culture.

So, while we need to relate our preaching to this all-prevailing cultural ethos of our time, we are to do so demolitionally. For post-modern deconstructionism contains within it the seeds of its own deconstruction, as all human rebellion against God and his truth carries the seeds of its own destruction. The biggest mistake the contemporary preacher can make is to imagine that connection with the culture depends upon any sort of accommodation to its presuppositions, because the seeming impregnable citadel is already crumbling. Listen to Roger Scruton again in his lecture “Extinguishing the Light,” delivered in 2004:

> In place of objectivity we have only inter-subjectivity—in other words consensus. Truths, meanings, facts and values are now regarded as negotiable. The curious thing, however, is that this woolly-minded subjectivism goes with a vigorous censorship. Those who put consensus in the place of truth, quickly find themselves distinguishing the true from the false consensus. . . . while holding that all cultures are equal and judgement between

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³Ibid., 115.
them absurd, the new relativism covertly appeals to the opposite belief. It is in the business of persuading us that Western culture and the traditional curriculum are racist, ethnocentric, patriarchal and therefore beyond the pale of political acceptability. False though these accusations are, they presuppose the very universalist vision which they declare to be impossible.

He concludes, and this is highly relevant for our confidence in proclamation, that post-modernist advocates share duplicity of purpose. Quote:

They seek on the one hand to undermine all claims to absolute truth, and on the other hand to uphold the orthodoxies upon which their congregation depends. The very reasoning which sets out to destroy the ideas of objective truth and absolute value imposes political correctness as absolutely binding, and cultural relativism as objectively true. (p. 117)

So, don’t buy shares in the accommodation to post-modernism church methodology, because the parent company is already a bankrupt concern! Preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Let it expose the error, with all its inconsistency and inner contradictions. God’s truth demolishes strongholds by undermining their foundations.

C. Love the Listeners!

My third and final conviction relates neither to the biblical content nor the contemporary target of the sermon, but to the preacher as the connector, the bridge by which God’s Truth makes the journey from the page of Scripture to the mind, heart, and will of the hearer, with life-changing effect. Since there is much truth in Phillips Brooks’s description of preaching as “truth through personality,” the preacher’s own personal character and approach is of primary significance. David Lim is a South Korean who pastors a Korean congregation in Carrollton, Texas. This year he has published a fascinating study in the area of his doctoral work entitled “Expository Preaching and Generation X.” It is a fine piece of work, which I commend to you, published by Emanuel University Press. Picking up on Aristotle’s classic “On Rhetoric,” Lim relates the three ways by which an audience can be engaged and persuaded as logos, pathos, and ethos. The first concerns content, the second delivery, but the third he defines as “the speaker’s trustworthiness of character and his ability to express the message” (p. 81). Following a clue from Bryan Chapell’s Christ-Centered Preaching, he relates this combination to Paul’s statement, as an apostolic model, in 1 Thess 1:5: “Our gospel came to you not simply with words (logos), but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (pathos)”; but then he adds, “You know how we lived among you
for your sake." That is ethos. And it is Lim's thesis that the function of ethos is the most important element in addressing Generation Xers. So, he writes:

In the modern era, especially the power of knowledge and reason were effective tools for communicating with listeners. The expository preacher is often regarded as an analyst of the Scripture, an apologist, a problem solver. Postmodern listeners, however, have a tendency to oppose authority based on position and knowledge. They prefer authority based in relationships and friendships. They reject the professional and decorated image of the preacher, but prefer the preacher who demonstrates a pure faith and lives a simple life. Authenticity is the most significant emerging value for Generation Xers. (p. 79)

In essence, this is a great encouragement to major on the NT priorities summed up in Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim 4:16). Who we are and how we speak can sometimes drown out what we say. But this is an incentive not to be open-ended in content, but to be warm-hearted in approach. We rightly seek to demolish strongholds, but that is because we want to rescue those who have become imprisoned by them. The love which we reveal to our hearers, as we take God's Word and apply it in practical and relevant ways to their life situations, is still the greatest resource the preacher has to offer, because it reflects the nature of the message and the God of grace who has revealed it. We are called not simply to love the Word, but to love the Lord, and as we love, to serve him in our preaching, so he will call and empower us to love those to whom he sends us.

To succumb to cultural presuppositions in our preaching is no act of love towards the congregation, however accommodating and unthreatening it may appear to be. In fact, it deprives them of illumination and certainty, understanding and assurance. Postmodern preaching, if that is not a contradiction in terms, leaves the burden of meaning with the listener and the criteria for deciding what that might be limited to his or her own experience. Sincerity is commendable, but life is full of tragic examples of those who were unquestionably sincere, but in the end sincerely wrong. It is in the application that the preacher's love for his hearers is likely to be most evidenced. As God's Word is faithfully and carefully explained, its significance must also be unpacked, in a way which impacts the real world, outside the church building, where we are called to worship God for the rest of the week. But that cannot begin to happen effectively unless it starts within the life and experience of the preacher.
In a book published forty years ago by Helmut Thielicke entitled *The Trouble with the Church*, the great German preacher explored the Western world, post the Second World War, and asked what had happened to the Reformation view of preaching as "the source and spring of Christian faith." Exploring what had caused its marginalization even then, he noted how advertising was reducing the credibility of testimony and the growing suspicion that Christian faith was merely the product of psychological and social manipulation. But for Thielicke the central issue which he picked up in post-war European culture was, "Does the preacher really live in the house of the dogmas he proclaims? Does all the rest of his life (out of the pulpit and the church) relate to that house?" Where is his personal center of gravity? Recognizing that "where your treasure is there will your heart be also," he concluded that if the preacher was boring the congregation, it was probably because he was boring himself. He no longer lived in the house of his utterance. While we recognize that good preaching may not easily fill a church, we know that bad preaching will easily empty it.

Attacked by rationalism in the eighteenth century, liberalism in the nineteenth, skepticism and materialism in the twentieth, and now post-modern relativism in the twenty-first, can we still have confidence in expository preaching, preaching that connects? Yes, if the preacher is proclaiming the Word of God in Scripture. Then the voice of God is truly heard. Its efficacy is neither determined, nor limited, by the technical quality or intellectual ability of the preacher. It is God who speaks through the lips of men, which means that Scripture still is and always must be, in H. O. Old's splendid phrase, "the fixed norm for preaching and exposition the only valid method." But the other ingredient, the other focal point of the ellipse is equally vital. To use Old's word it has to be "actualized," skillfully and powerfully directed towards this unique group of hearers and their life situations. All good preaching is essentially dialogical—in two senses. First, between the preacher and the congregation, so that what is said is weighed and tested. But second, between God and his people (including the preacher) so that what is heard and tested is believed and obeyed, and so that the God who speaks is honored, loved, and worshipped. For, as J. I. Packer has said, "The proper aim of preaching is to mediate meetings with God."