

The Devaluation of Preaching and the Death of the Church: Towards Excellence in Preaching as a Model for Church Growth.

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Abstract:

As the Emergent Church comes to the forefront of the Church growth movement the value of and emphasis on preaching has faded into the background. This paper will focus on how some in the emergent church view both the bible and preaching. It will seek to survey their perspectives and suggest some possible implications. This paper will ask, is it plausible to suggest that the role of preaching in the Church will dictate its final outcome?

Postmodernism as a cultural entity has become a main topic of conversation in academia in recent years. Those involved in the scholarly pursuit each offer their diagnosis, prognosis, suggestions, and concerns. The diversity in the discussion is as broad and ill-defined as the subject itself. My ultimate concern is not with postmodernism, nor its definitions, but how the Church has adapted, or mal-adapted for that matter, to its influence. My deepest apprehension is how postmodernism, as surfaced in the emerging church movement, has sequestered the Word of God and no longer finds it foundational to faith. Faith is authentic only as it relates to any given individual experience. This existential idea arose from a concern with what is identified as consumerism, a product of the seeker-sensitive movement. Thus, each individual experience is justified under the auspices of vintage Christianity (Kimball, 2003) and becomes the yardstick by which to measure truth. It is my opinion that the proclamation of the Word has become the first and foremost casualty of a movement that seeks to speak relevantly to the culture. In order to justify this thesis one must look at how the emerging church views the Bible and especially the role they see preaching having, on our post-modern context.

The Role of the Bible in the Emerging Church

In terms of analysis; clearly identifying a common stream of thought, with regards to the Bible, in the emerging church is difficult. Each emerging church writer offers their own twist on how they describe the Bible and what its function is. Thus, in order to be accurate, this analysis will proceed from the stand-point of general operating categories in which most emerging writers might feel comfortable.¹

The narrative that the bible communicates is a driving hermeneutical force for the interpretive milieu in the emergent church. This story is not defined in terms of the

overall metanarrative of God's revelation and the inherent truth in that story, but the novel of God as he works in history. McLaren comments,

The narrative approach does not lessen the agony one feels reading the conquest of Canaan with the eyes of one taught by Jesus to love all, including enemies. But it helps turn the Bible back into what it is, not a look-it up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham, into a new way of life. This isn't the deterministic progress of Marxism or capitalism; this is the struggle of common people in the journey of faith, hope, and love. And it challenges us: to be truly biblical does not be to be preoccupied with some golden age in the ancient world and God's word to people back then. It means learning from the past to let God's story, God's will, and God's dream continue to come true in us and our children.

But this is a whole new way of approaching the Bible, you say. This is a whole new concept of being biblical. Orthodoxy has a deeply different feel in this light-less rigid, more generous. (emphasis his) Yes, I think you're right (McLaren, 2004, p. 171).

This innovative approach to the Canon is intentionally disassociating itself from previous understandings of narrative theology. The drive for a generous orthodoxy attempts to encompass all the good aspects and minimize the perceived inadequacies, yet it supersedes God's revelation of normative truth throughout the narrative. Truth is not only ill-defined, but is no longer the over-arching goal of God's revelation. McLaren's desire to be "truly biblical" distorts and oversimplifies the truth of who God is and how he calls us to live. Carson raises a similar concern,

I do not know any thoughtful Christian from any camp who thinks being biblical means "being preoccupied with some golden age in the ancient world." On the other hand, it most certainly means coming to grips with "God's word to people back then," precisely because God's written revelation is an *historical* revelation. Many Christian thinkers have recognized that the framework of the Bible constitutes a grand narrative, that the parts of the Bible fit into that narrative, that the Bible includes within its pages many discrete narratives, and that at many times across the centuries Christian thinkers were too quick to jump to atemporal emphases that lose the narrative thread and unwittingly distorted Scripture. Much of the biblical theology movement has been at the forefront of trying to sort this out and listen afresh to the biblical text. But the Bible includes a lot of things in addition to narrative, or things embedded in narrative, or sometimes things that embed narrative: law, lament, instruction, wisdom, ethical injunction, warning, apocalyptic imagery, letters, promise, reports, propositions, ritual, and more. This easy appeal to the overarching narrative proves immensely distortive (Carson, 2005, p. 164).

McLaren is not alone in his attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct the Bible to fit into the paradigm of the post-modern generation. Others also distance themselves from the motif

of biblical truth and sought to redefine terms that are offsetting to a post-modern generation. Kimball, although not to the same degree as McLaren, in his discussion on the shifting values in approach to preaching suggests that “Biblical terms like *gospel* and *Armageddon* need to be deconstructed and redefined” (Kimball, 2003, p. 175). This redefinition is done in order to assist those in the post-modern generation from feeling offended by terms that delineate between those who are in and those who are out. In all fairness, one does not have to look far to find individuals who have been hurt by dogma. Many have found themselves in churches where they have seen hypocrisy and been hurt by disingenuous followers. The answer, however, is not a departure from Scripture, or even to redefine its terminology, but a return to it.

As the Emergent Church has rightfully attempted to speak relevantly to a post-modern culture many in the movement have inaccurately painted the Bible with broad brush strokes and inadequately portrayed those who confess to adhere to it as authoritative. Some are reacting to the “consumer-driven” mentality of the seeker-sensitive movement, of which I share similar concerns. Kimball suggests that the seeker-sensitive movement has created a multitude of Christians who come to Church as consumers and seek to be entertained (Kimball, 2003). Others advocate that the new generation does not operate in the same categories as those of past eras and thus the Church must adapt in order to survive (Pagitt, 2005). Regardless of how most of the emerging writers got to where they are there is a common tendency to generalize and oversimplify the biblical revelation. My concern is that many fail to sufficiently deal with the Scriptures and the transcendent truth it presents. Their motive seems to be to create broader categories in which more will feel comfortable. For example, in reference to the justice of the cross and its implications Chalke contends,

The fact that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside the Church have found this a twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love”. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil (Chalke, 2003, p.182-183).

Chalke commits a serious hermeneutical error in attempting to defend God's love by denying His justice. His understanding of biblical substitutionary atonement seems to misrepresent the necessity of God's work on the cross (Hebrews 9). It is this oversimplification of God's revelation that has domesticated the Bible and leads to many false dichotomies that do more to engender differences which inevitably create a new form of dogma. Other emergent writers have committed similar errors by failing to deal with the actual truth in the Bible. In his chapter on “Why I'm Liberal/Conservative” (McLaren, 2004 p.131ff) McLaren openly suggests that the modern notions that the bible has a transcendent authority and offers some truths that are normative are woefully misplaced. Furthermore in the section on “The Liberal/Protestant Jesus” he suggests,

For some complex reasons that we can't go into here, some (not all) liberal Protestants will question whether some or all of the miraculous deeds recounted in the Gospels (and elsewhere in the Bible) actually happened. Instead they often read the miracle accounts as instructive fictions, parables, fables, myths not intended by the storytellers of the early church to be historically accurate or inaccurate, but intended instead to dramatically convey a deeper meaning, given by God. So, when Jesus multiplies a boy's loaves and fish to feed the multitude, we are being told in the language of poetry that if we will give whatever little we have, God will make it more effective than we could imagine. Or when Jesus heals the paralytic, we can see our spiritual paralysis more clearly and believe it can be healed. Or when Jesus heals blindness, we acknowledge our own blindness and need for enlightenment or new vision (McLaren, 2004, p.60).

This hermeneutic manipulates any given text or event and trivializes it to a fictitious fable that has flexible truth based on the individual experiencing it. In reference to the aforementioned miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. To suggest that the story, reduced to its lowest common denominator, is about Jesus multiplying the meager things we bring him, anthropomorphizes the text and takes the attention off Jesus and places it squarely on what Jesus can do for me. Driscoll summarizes adequately,

I am particularly concerned, however, with some growing trends among some people: the rejection of Jesus' death on the cross as a penal substitute for our sins; resistance to openly denouncing homosexual acts as sinful; the questioning of literal eternal torment in hell, which is a denial that holds up only until, in an ironic bumper, you die and find yourself in hell; the rejection of God's sovereignty over and knowledge of the future, as if God were a junior-college professor who knows only bits and pieces of trivia;... This is ultimately all the result of a diminished respect for the perfection, authority, and clarity of Scripture (Driscoll, 2006, p. 22).

Thus, even within the emerging movement there are those who echo my grave concerns about how the Bible is used, or not used for that matter, by some in the emerging churches.

In many of the emergent writings, the Bible appears to only make a cameo appearance. Their deep passion for relational ministry and a missional church are serious and biblical endeavors. Having an authentic Christian faith is precisely what the Scriptures promote. My apprehension is not with the Emergent Church's motivation or mission, but their solutions to the obvious problems within the modern Church. I fear that it has pragmatically created a Bible that is merely a story containing ideas about God and stripped it of its authority.

There is one final area that needs addressing in relation to the role of the Bible in the Emergent Church. In the discussion of the Scriptures in emergent writings, a few highlight the atrocities committed in the name of biblical fidelity. Yet, as noted previously they seem to have a disingenuous approach to historical biblical theology.

That is to say that as the landscape of historical Christianity is surveyed the ultimate outcome is that very little seemed to be authentic Christianity. Accordingly, former expressions of Christianity created systematic and rigid structures leading to further doctrinal isolation and more denominations.

Protestants have paid more attention to the Bible than any other group, but sadly, much of their Bible study was undertaken to fuel their efforts to prove themselves right and others wrong (and therefore worthy of protest)(emphasis his). If the Bible does not yield its best resources to people who approach it seeking ammunition with which to lay their brethren low, then Protestant Christianity has at time done grave disservice both to the bible and to Protestant themselves. How many Protestants can't pick up the Bible without hearing arguments play in their minds on every page, echoes of the polemical preachers they have heard since childhood? How much Bible study is, therefore, an adventure in missing the point (McLaren, 2004, p.126)?

Most Protestants I know are aware of their tainted history and are equally concerned at some of the violence committed in the name of Christ. For McLaren to suggest that the Protestant passion for biblical fidelity is “an adventure in missing the point” (McLaren, 2004, p.126) not only seems arrogant but is historically inaccurate. In the reformation and post-reformation environment many sought to return to the bible as the sole basis of authority. The bible in the vernacular changed the power base of the church and liberated sincere Christians to follow Jesus Christ as He revealed Himself in the Scriptures. It is precisely this appeal to an authority beyond us that is the source of much of the problems for many of the emerging writers. McLaren persuades,

I should add briefly that fundamentalists and Calvinists share two traits that I hope will be dropped by any who wish to participate in a generous orthodoxy. The first is a fondness for reductionism, epitomized by their love for the Latin word *sola* (only), seen in what are often called Reformation mottoes: *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola Tulip*, *sola the five fundamentals*, etc. The belief that truth is best understood by reducing it to a few fundamentals or a single “*sola*” insight is, to me, at least questionable if not downright dangerous (McLaren, 2004, p.198).

If I desire to participate in a generous orthodoxy McLaren suggests dropping the idea that Scripture is the sole basis of authority, that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven, and any other distinction might be commendable. Yet, McLaren seems not only to have failed in being generous or accurate in his assessment of the historical theologians, but removed any way to understand truth. My desire is not to be equally disingenuous, but to offer some caution. If we are unable to distinguish truth from fiction and are able to remove God and His Word as our sole base for authority we can easily cease to function as His Church.

The Role of Preaching in the Emergent Church

The reason for the discussion on how the emerging leaders view the Scriptures is because those views will inevitably shape their understanding of preaching. Many emergent writers have tackled the topic of preaching in the post-modern context from their own angle. My desire is to fairly discuss their views and offer some concerns and my thoughts on the ultimate implications of these positions. Pagitt begins his book suggesting,

I'm writing with the assumption that most of you who are reading this book have concluded what I have: Preaching doesn't work—at least not in the way we hope. If it did, pastors wouldn't reach with such anticipation for new books about preaching; we'd already be following the established, tried-and-true methods laid out in the huge array of available preaching resources. We wouldn't have to preach anymore; we would just replay our perfect sermons and watch our people change (Pagitt, 2005, pg. 18).

Or take for instance a blog called “Out of Ur” found in *Leadership Journal* on July, 2006. Fitch writes a small article open for discussion on “The Myth of Expository Preaching and the Commodification of the Word.” In this article Fitch advocates,

Most disturbing about the myth of expository preaching is the excessive individualism that is promoted by the assumptions that undergird it. Expository preaching can actually encourage the person in the pew to be isolated from further conversation and testing of the Scriptures within the congregation (1 John 4:1). This is because expository preaching commodifies the Word. It carefully dissects the text into three (stereotypically) points and an application, which is then offered to the parishioner as the means to further her Christian life. The person sits isolated in the pew encouraged to take notes, analyze, digest the sermon, rarely giving the Amen. Expository preaching operates under the assumption that the congregation (or radio listener) is composed of individual Cartesian selves isolated and separated from each other, yet capable of listening and receiving truth as information from the pulpit (Fitch, 2006).

Both of these individuals represent what the Emergent Church has perceived as the problem with modern evangelical churches: preaching. I would like to suggest that the devaluation of preaching, as promoted by the Emergent Church, taken to its farthest extreme will inevitably lead to the death of the Church. The suggestion that preaching is the problem and makes God's Word a commodity is not only inaccurate, but stands in contrast to the facts. Thom S. Rainer researched a group of individuals known as the “unchurched.” In his study Rainer defines the unchurched as “people who have recently (typically within the last two years) become active in church. For all or a large portion of their lives they were not in church. Some of the formerly unchurched considered themselves Christians even when they did not attend church. Most were not Christians before they found a Church home” (Rainer, 2001, pg. 22). When the question was asked, “What factors led you to choose this church?” (Rainer, 2001, pg. 56) the response was remarkable. The two major categories for a formerly unchurched individual becoming a Christian and involved in the ministry were preaching (90%) and doctrine (88%). In each

of these cases the overwhelming majority suggest that preaching that is biblical and relevant is the decisive factor in discipleship within the Church. For example,

Interestingly, a crisis was the impetus to Vera finding the Baptist church in a town near Charlotte, North Carolina, but the crisis was not in Vera's life. "Lindsay, my Baptist neighbor, found out that her husband was fooling around. It ended up in a messy divorce," Vera told us. "I went to church with her as a way of supporting her during her tough times."

But it was Vera's life that was changed. "I would go to several churches in the course of a year. All different kinds of churches. I guess it was my weird way of going to confession without talking to a priest," she explained.

"I was pretty satisfied with my life," Vera said. "No big crisis. No sense that something was missing in my life. Good family. I sure was caught off guard when I went to Lindsay's church."

Vera's intention was to offer Lindsay support by going with her to Thompson Memorial Baptist Church. But then she heard Mike Lovelett preach. "Mike preached in a way like I've never heard anybody," Vera gushed. She described his preaching as "line-by-line preaching," her way of describing verse-by-verse expository preaching.

Vera never had an interest in studying the Bible until she sat under the preaching ministry of Mike Lovelett. "Mike gave me 'meaty' preaching. He gave me a desire to study the Bible. It all happened so fast. The next thing I knew, I realized what the Bible taught about salvation. I realized I was as lost as lost could be" (Rainer, 2001, p.58).

According to Rainer's research it is precisely biblical preaching that develops a love and passion for the individual study of God's Word. If the Scriptures are of central importance to the faith and practice of the Church, those values can and will carry over to those passionately committed to God's work in the world. For example, because God is zealous for the lost His church will be marked with a similar passion for the lost.

Prior to changing the way we do Church in order to communicate relevantly to the post-modern culture, it would seem wise to first attempt to uncover what God's Word might say in reference to our particular situation. Thus, in the second half of this paper I will seek to present a way forward that distinguishes itself from some of the Emergent Church. My desire is to remain biblically faithful suggesting that it is precisely this fidelity to the proclamation of God's revealed Word that will dictate the ultimate outcome of His Church. Before beginning I would like to outline a few assumptions in order that are central to my argument.

The assumption, with regards to the role of the Bible and thus preaching, is that God has uncovered Himself in the words of the Bible and thus super-intended its writing and

transmission, creating a book that contains His actual words in its original form. There are those who reject such a “divine” model in regards to the Bible and especially in reference to the preaching of its contents. One outspoken critic is Joseph M. Webb, associate professor of homiletics at Claremont School of Theology in Claremont, California. In his book, *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism* he suggests that: “the preacher is encouraged to make various views or definitions of the Bible a part of the sermon process” (Webb, 1998, pg. 79). Although not an emerging writer, what Webb espouses is that the preacher should not deny the plurality of the biblical account or even the diversity of definitions associated with the “Word of God,” but rather incorporate that into the sermon. He suggests,

The point is that no view of the Bible, no single definition of it, is the correct one, and none is, in itself, sacred...Here, in fact, is the first level of overt pluralism with which the pulpit must come to terms. It is the pluralism of the Bible as Bible, the Bible as symbol, the Bible, more specifically, as hub symbol in the lives of virtually everyone, including biblical scholar and preacher (Webb, 1998, pg. 79).

His assumption is that by seeking uniformity in understanding the Bible we make it an icon and thereby place it on a level it was never meant to occupy. His solution to the incongruity presented by those who seek a homogeneous biblical corpus is to merely recognize the multiplicity of definitions and present them as part of the sermon. In answer to the question of how this pluralism would aid in preaching, or in the mission of the Church, Webb points to the benefits of an “inclusive attitude to those who live and work on the other religious banks” (Webb, 1998, pg. 80). He is even so bold as to assert that our beliefs or commitments to the Bible are not from God, but “come from some place in our past” (Webb, 1998, pg. 80). This inevitably leads him to the only logical assertion he can make which is that, “One is encouraged to spend less time with texts themselves and more time with the history of the Bible and the Bible’s early communities” (Webb, 1998, pg. 81). When asked about the authority of the text and whether it has contemporary relevance he conjectures that “any text, including biblical text—is also a pluralist phenomenon,” (Webb, 1998, pg. 84) thus indicating that the authority and relevance come from the actual preacher himself. In summary, Webb is arguing against a uniform view of the Bible and its material and suggesting instead that the historical-critical understanding leads to a broader inclusiveness and is more conducive to the overall objective of God’s Word. From his perspective, the task of preaching is to present its pluralistic nature. At the heart of his suggestion is that the Gospel is itself pluralistic and thus preachers are free to preach about the multiplicity of definitions available with regards to the Bible.

The position that Webb argues for is susceptible to criticism on many levels. First, he treats all of Scripture as merely an account of historical events that had a significant impact on the world, not as the actual divine Word of God. He interjects a strong element of subjectivity into the exegetical process, suggesting that preaching is a forum for opinions about Scripture rather than Scripture itself. This is contrary to what the Bible actually suggests about itself. Hirsch identifies the concern by pointing out, “To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning... [is] to reject the only

compelling normative principle of interpretation, if for nothing else, one must ask for the author's purpose" (Hirsch, 1967, pg. 5). The source of meaning, according to Scripture, comes from the words of God and not from the lips of men. Greidanus further asserts,

a major reason for seeking the purpose of the author is, therefore, consciously to shift attention away from ourselves to the Scriptures, away from our concerns to the author's concerns, away from our purposes to the author's purpose. In other words, asking for the author's purpose is an attempt at genuine listening by cutting out all subjective interference (Greidanus, 1988, pg. 7).

By having subjectivity as part of the exegetical process the preacher actually interferes with the actual procedure itself. The anthropocentric way of approaching preaching ends up alienating itself from its actual purpose in the first place. By seeking to be inclusive, Webb has presented a pluralistic form of preaching that actually excludes the original writers themselves and creates a counter-productive method of homiletics.

A second apprehension with Webb's argument is that he imposes an unnatural framework on Scripture. From the perspective of the actual authors who wrote it, they acknowledge that what they are writing is actually divinely inspired. Paul, for instance, outlines the aims of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16. He communicates that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." Thus, there is a divine intention behind the writing of the Bible that Webb does not adequately deal with. His concern is to allow pluralism a place in the preaching of the Word of God. In doing this, however, he actually removes the foundation of Scripture and fails to present adequate reasons for doing so. For the sake of clarity, this is not to say that there is only one intention for a given passage. As Philip Payne explains,

In spite of the crucial role the human author's intention has for the meaning of the text his conscious intention does not necessarily *exhaust* the meaning of his statements, especially in more poetic and predictive writings. Ultimately God is the author of Scripture, and it is his intention alone that exhaustively determines the meaning (Payne, 1977, pg. 243).

What is important to consider, that Webb fails to address, is that no one author could have an intention that is contrary to the Canon as a whole. Each passage is placed in the context of a book and that book is placed in the context of the Bible as a whole. Hence, the Bible as a unit aids in its own interpretation. The whole concept of pluralism is alien to the totality of the biblical witness.

Thirdly, Webb's proposal is contrary to the internal verifiability of those who read the Scriptures. Those who were inspired to write understood their writings as one of the ways God revealed Himself to His people. The bible, in a sense, is a system with internal checks and balances. Each author's ideas are synthesized together, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to provide a unique account of God's work and design for humankind. The Scriptures deliberately set themselves apart from other books by claiming divine,

rather than human authorship. Contrary to Webb's understanding, the Bible reveals God Himself and His words which, when communicated correctly, possess God's authority.

Holding this view of authorial intention, however, does present some pragmatic questions that cannot be disregarded. Initially, this discussion is complicated by the fact that some books of the Bible are composed by multiple authors, or even contain the presence of redactors. Ultimately, the solution to this difficulty lies with the understanding of God's use of humans to bring about his design. Sydney Greidanus argues in *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* for an understanding of each author and redactor as creative instruments used for the development of the canon. He notices that the concept of redactor is no longer thought of as individuals who were "scissors-and-paste men" but creative authors in their own right" (Greidanus, 1988, pg. 108). As a result, when discussing the need to find the author's intention of a passage we are using author in the broad sense to refer to the last major redactor.

This inevitably leads to another concern about the ability to find the author's original intention. It is seemingly problematic to try to discover the author's reason for writing a passage when little or nothing is known about that author. One should not initially assume that the basis for discovering the author's intentions is based on some psychological criteria, but is established on their writings. The text, context, and flow of thought of any given pericope is how one ascertains the argument the writer is attempting to make. Little needs to be known about their life to discover what they were intending to say. Greidanus is again pertinent on this point. He argues that, "searching for the author's purpose in anything but the text would introduce into the interpretation not only a hypothetical element but also a very subjective notion" (Greidanus, 1988, pg. 108). Payne concurs noting "ultimately all argument about meaning or the author's intention must be rooted in the text if it is to be objective" (Payne, 1977, pg. 251).

The reason for examining the issue of authorial intent is that it plays a central role in the development of this paper. The basis for examining the Scriptural evidence is that God has communicated his desires for both faith and practice, and consequently, has conveyed His desires in regards to preaching. By beginning a dialogue on homiletics, the objective is to discover God's intentions for preaching and mold them into the framework that it was originally intended. Thus, the fundamental starting point in order to adequately answer the dilemmas presented by the historical misuse of preaching is to examine scriptural evidence. This is assuming that preaching seeks to utilize the Bible as its manual for the material necessary for the presentation of the Gospel message. One note of clarification with regards to authorial intent: I am not espousing that any one preacher confesses to having an omniscient understanding of all or any portions of Scripture. I am suggesting, however, that Scripture is our only authority and thus becomes what is ultimately normative for faith and practice. There must be a spirit of genuine humility and charity in those areas that God has sought to leave mysterious.

A Suggestion for a Way Forward²

The role of proclamation as an avenue of God's work is as ancient as creation itself. God's speaking not only had creative power (Genesis 1), but also functioned in many other ways: to call His followers to obedience, aid them in the knowledge and experience of His character (Habakkuk), recognize His power in suffering (Job), to name just a few. It is the communication of God's Word and His Will to those who seek to be faithful to Him that sets the stage for how we understand what preachers are commissioned to do. In order to accomplish this task it will be crucial to look at the preaching ministry of Christ and what He understood his message to be. It will also prove helpful to look back to the prophetic ministry of Ezekiel as illustration of God's call on preachers.

The Bible is the fundamental starting point for the homiletic enterprise. On a practical level a preacher could not preach, in the truest sense of the word, without the material of the Bible, regardless of how he or she views its nature and purpose. On a theological level, the Old Testament and the New, testify to the fact that God has sought to communicate with His people. This communication entails many things, not the least of which is His desire to see His creation return to Him. Localzo, speaking about Jesus' sermon in Luke 4:16-21, notes,

Jesus views the very ministry to which he sees himself called as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic summons. Jesus' ministry itself, as he understood it, was the genesis of the *euangelion* (good news) to the world (Localzo, 1995, p. 41).

Green elaborates further, stating,

This was no ordinary good news and no ordinary messenger. It was nothing less than God's long-awaited salvation, proclaimed by the Messiah Himself. God had indeed come to the rescue of a world in need. No wonder, then, that it became known as *to euangelion*, the good news (Green, 1992, p.7).

According to this understanding, Christ is then the central bridge between God's communication in the past and His communication now. It should be noted that the ultimate objective here is not to find Christ's method of preaching and incorporate those insights into an effective contemporary model. It is beyond that, the focus is to understand Christ's involvement in preaching and the central elements present in His message. These elements are the foundation of the Gospel and thus necessitate employment in order to present the message with integrity. Hence, for the sake of clarity, let us follow two lines of inquiry. Initially, how does Christ proclaim His message in relation to the Scriptures? Subsequently, what responsibility did the preacher or prophets have in heralding the message given to Him by God? The first question will be answered from the standpoint of how Jesus understood the kingdom of God and its arrival with Him. The second question will be explored from how we understand the role of an Old Testament prophet and his role in maintaining and preaching the authentic message from God.

In each of the synoptic gospels the preparation for Christ's ministry begins with the preaching of John the Baptist.³ His message was a simple one, 'repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' This proclamation is the same assertion that Christ proclaims throughout his entire ministry. In order to understand the essential elements of the Gospel, it becomes vital to elucidate the precise meaning of the kingdom of heaven within the public ministry of Christ. The ultimate objective, in this section, is to explore the area of the synoptic tradition in which Christ is explicitly engaged in ministry in order to come to an understanding of that ministry as a whole. Since much of Jesus' evangelistic ministry revolves around the statement, 'repent for the kingdom of God is near' it is necessary to comprehend what He meant by that.

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate concerning how one understands "the kingdom of God has come" found in such places as Mark 1:15.⁴ Much of this discussion revolves around how to understand the coming of the kingdom. C.H. Dodd, in his book *The Parables of the Kingdom*, advocates that the coming of Christ is the arrival of the kingdom.⁵ His position is commonly understood under the banner of 'realized eschatology.' According to Perrin, "he [Dodd] argued that, for Jesus, the kingdom was present, that Jesus taught the reality of the kingdom as realized in his own ministry" (Perrin, 1963, pg. 58). This is contrary to the notion that the kingdom of God has merely "come near" proposed by scholars such as J.Y. Cambell. Another perception, however, has been presented that gives further credence to the contextual setting which Christ is in. Jesus is placed in a culture that has long awaited the appearance of the Messiah. Surely, that had various nuances among those involved, but the atmosphere of expectation was still apparent. Thrilling notes,

One must read the prophets to grasp the immense dynamic of the expectation, the unbroken and ever newly awakened faith in an "absolute future" of God. Only then does one know what this statement says in which the faith of early Christianity has become shaped. *The unsurpassable future of God has begun* (Thrilling, 1969, pg. 47-48).⁶

This insight posits the notion that the time before the kingdom has been completed and the kingdom is beginning to be actualized, with the appearance of the Messiah. This means, according to some scholars, that Christ understands his ministry to be both the fulfillment of the time prior to the kingdom and the instigation of the long anticipated kingdom itself. God breaking into His creation through Christ is the commencement of an anticipated fulfillment of the Old Covenant and the establishment of a new one. This 'already and not yet' understanding of His evangelistic ministry offers a paradigm for understanding His persuasive message, and a basis for understanding the requirements placed on those who will follow. The question now becomes, what does Jesus perceive the relationship to be between the present and future kingdoms?

Within his evangelistic ministry, it is plausible that Jesus understands the ushering in of the kingdom is commenced at the instigation of His ministry.⁷ But, his relation to the past kingdom is more basic than that. Jesus is seen as being in close connection with the classical Hebrew prophets, as Ford suggests. Jesus was himself perceived by the first-

century Church as a prophet. Ford further elaborates on the association between the two kingdoms by asserting that,

Jesus did not advertise himself—this would have been offensive megalomania—but he so preached that after the cross and resurrection it was recognized that in him the kingdom of God, which he had proclaimed, by means of similies, metaphors, and parables, and demonstrated by the mighty works, *had indeed already come*. Christ is the Kingdom (Ford, 1979, pg. 43).

Thus, there is no incongruity between the prophetic ministry of Christ and his role as the Messiah. It is also apparent that Jesus understands His ministry to entail an inauguration of the kingdom combined with the future hope of his return. It is between the first and second advents of Christ in which the disciples and the church were commissioned to proclaim His message. Thus, Christ becomes the fulcrum between the past and future kingdoms, which enables Him to preach authentically that the kingdom of God is actualized in Him. The kingdom of God plays such a vital role in Christ's teaching it is now important to turn our attention to specific instances when He is conveying what the kingdom actually is. The assumption is that by clarifying the content of Jesus' message it will facilitate the understanding of how He sees His message in relation to the other events in Scripture. If Christ is truly concerned with the exposition of God's work previous to His appearance, there will be an unmistakable continuity between the two messages.

Understanding how Jesus views his role in relation to the kingdom sets the backdrop for his ministry. As the instigator of the kingdom, Christ not only sets forth what the kingdom looks like, but also its requirements. The idea of the kingdom can take on many different nuances, but the main focus is to answer the question, what does Jesus understand the good news of the kingdom to be? Beasley-Murray remarks,

...the promise that a time is to come when God will exercise his almighty, sovereign power in judgment upon the evil powers of this world and in the deliverance of his people. Such is the meaning of the "kingdom of God" in the teaching and proclamation of Jesus, but with emphasis on deliverance. For him the "kingdom of God" is virtually a synonym for "salvation"... "God in action to fulfill his purpose of grace for the world" is what Jesus ever had before him when he spoke of the kingdom of the Father. And this action was taking place through him. This proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus is inseparably bound up with a call for response from his hearers (Beasley-Murray, 1986, pg. 114).

Christ's proclamation to repent and believe in the gospel is littered throughout the synoptic gospels. This gospel, or good news, is the content of Christ's message which sets the stage for repentance. It is problematic, however, to grasp exactly what the content of the Gospel is.

Some have suggested that the Gospel contains, almost exclusively, the death and resurrection of Jesus and its implications. Vernon Stanfield, in his book *Effective Evangelistic Preaching* asserts that “evangelistic preaching is the proclamation of the good news concerning the redemptive acts of Christ” (Stanfield, 1965, pg. 11). This simplistic notion, however, fails to recognize that if Christ is involved in calling people to believe in the Gospel previous to His death and resurrection, this cannot be the sole substance of the Gospel message. Thus, the good news of the kingdom must be marked by more than just the death and resurrection of Christ. Friedrich clarifies,

Jesus is the One who brings the good news of the expected last time. To the question of (John the) Baptist He replies in Mt. 11:5 (Lk. 7:22) the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. The whole sentence finds its climax in the preaching of the gospel. The message actualizes the new time and makes possible the signs of Messianic fulfillment. The Word brings divine rule... The answer which Jesus gives to the Baptist is that the longed for time is now dawning, that the eschatological good news expected from the days of Dt. Is. Is now being proclaimed, and that the Word has power and brings into effect what is spoken. Word and miracle, the proclamation of the glad tidings and the resurrection of the dead are signs of the Messianic age (Friedrich, p. 718).

The key is that the good news is not solely a message about the death and resurrection of Christ, but a proclamation of restoration. Marking Jesus as king of the new kingdom, which he inaugurated, and restoring God’s creation to what it was meant to be is at the heart of the message. This is the reason that the miracles of Christ and the disciples play such a vital role in the message of the kingdom. The Messianic age has dawned and with it comes the invitation to join in Christ’s mission of restoration and unite in the collective hope for the ultimate restoration consummated at His return. There is a definite eschatological motivation inherent in the message that Christ preached. The longing for a future removed from the pain and suffering faced in the present is a vital part of the proclamation of the good news. There is a taste, however, of the restoration present in the here and now. The message of Christ is not only about an age to come, but includes the idea that at the present moment restoration has begun. The healing of the sick, the walking of the lame, and the resurrection of the dead are signs of the presence of the kingdom. Individual’s lives are being transformed in the presence of Christ and He is restoring them to physical health. The presence of the kingdom initiated by Christ is having a dramatic effect on the world he is in contact with.

The inexorable link between repentance and the kingdom of God is yet another key aspect of Christ’s ministry. His communication about the kingdom is habitually associated with an appeal, for all those who hear, to respond to His message. If it is true that the kingdom was inaugurated by Christ’s appearance then his ministry involves calling everyone to a transfer of allegiance. The time leading up to the kingdom has been fulfilled and now the long awaited kingdom has come. Thus, by urging all those present to repent for the kingdom of God is here, indicates that they need to turn away from prior errors committed to the place where those transgressions can be removed. Each of these

appeals are placed in the backdrop of Old Testament revelation. Christ's message is united with the presentation of the message of the past. Christ expositis the Torah as it relates to Him as the coming Messiah.

Lessons From a Prophet (a brief case study)

In a culture that is post-Christian and seemingly more and more anti-Christian, can preaching the Word of God really have any affect? This question is not new to those who seek to remain faithful to God and His message during times of cultural instability. Prophets played an essential role in maintaining the integrity of the message and God's work whether or not those around them even responded. As interpreters of both God's message and the specific cultural events they offer some insight on the way forward.⁸

Ezekiel, as the son of a priest, was well schooled in the Torah and familiar with the continual apostasy of his people. This familiarity made him well-suited to communicate Yahweh's message to a people who easily forget His promises for both judgment and restoration. His message was one that dared to say that God's presence would leave Zion unless His people were willing to repent. His bold message promised God's departure from the temple and its eventual destruction.

In order to understand Ezekiel's message more fully it is crucial that one understands many of the cultural influences that were present in Babylon at that time. Babylonia had a deep history that brought it into contact with various cultures throughout the ages and has a long history with the Hebrews, beginning in Genesis. The most important era for the Babylonians, for this discussion, came when the Late Assyrian Empire reached its height (c. 725-625 BC). During the pinnacle of this empire the Assyrians were in complete control of many nations, including Babylonia. This eventually led to a war in which the Assyrian Empire fell to Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar II. The first order of business for Nebuchadnezzar was to make the Neo-Babylonian Empire one of the most magnificent empires the world had ever seen. Nebuchadnezzar's mission was to construct a new and improved Babylonia, which included magnificent temples. Because Babylonia was a pantheistic culture and was littered with a pantheon of personal shires to different Gods, these temples played an important role in Babylonian religious life. However, one should not necessarily assume, although there were many temples present in the urban metropolis that ordinary individuals were allowed to worship at them. Presumably, the ordinary people of this urban city went to the local street-corner shrines or had a private niche at home in order to feed their God.⁹ During this period it is difficult to know how much the pagan culture of Babylonian affected the Hebrew nation. Nevertheless, God had continually cautioned the Hebrews against cultural borrowing for it leads to idolatry and apostasy, yet inevitably many would not listen. The Israelites were confident that God would never abandon His people so they thought a little cultural borrowing would not hurt. However, the heart of Ezekiel's message to the diaspora was one of judgment and one where God would abandon His people leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586. It comes as no surprise that his message was unpopular,

but he spoke on behalf of God in order to correct the misconception they had that God would never abandon His people or His temple.

The corrective nature of Ezekiel's message is crucial. God had called him as a prophet to preach a message to those who had functionally understood God's message but either misunderstood it or misappropriated it. They stood under the illusion that although in exile God would look over them and maintain for them a place of worship. The temple, the centerpiece of God's presence, became a security blanket in which many lived under the assumption that God would never remove it. Its destruction would symbolize the removal of God presence from His people, a thought inconceivable to the Hebrews, even those exiled to Babylonia. The Word of God as spoken through the prophet becomes, not a commodity, but the central element to anchor people to God in uncertain times.

Ezekiel was a preacher commissioned by God to proclaim His Word and was very well received. Ezekiel was known as a powerful preacher who was able to draw the masses in. He communicated the message relevantly and accurately, but to no affect. If anyone had a basis to throw out preaching and find more culturally relevant forms of communication, it was Ezekiel. Yet, remaining true to God's commission and His Word enforces what is easy to lose sight of; we are in charge of proclaiming the message, God is in charge of the results. Biblical preaching places God in sovereign control of the effect of that message. This is not to say that we should not contextualize our message, but to hold the bible in high esteem and let the Living Word do its work, in season and out of season (2 Timothy 4:2). If we are commissioned to preach God's Word, our primary responsibility is to be faithful to that message regardless of how people respond.

The Emergent Church is rightly filled with a passion to be missional and relevant in our post-modern. It is dangerous, however, to suggest that we can and should rely on our own creativity to reach the world. It is my suggestion that our passion for the lost stems directly from God's Word and thus sets a precedent for us to rely on Him to carry out His work in the world. We must be relevant to the ever changing culture, but prior to that we must be biblical and faithful to Him who has called us. The Bible is relevant, life changing, and powerful and any departure from it proves dangerous.

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¹ I recognize that I may not specifically deal with all the Emerging Church writings, but I have attempted to use a wide cross-section of material as found in the bibliography.

² I am well aware that by appealing to the Bible as the basis for validating the importance of preaching many will be unsympathetic to it. It easily creates a cyclical argument in which one could say, “but the bible says” and have no voice because for many in the Emergent Church this is not their starting point. Nonetheless, I am under the firm conviction that without the inherent authority of the Bible the Church deteriorates to nothing more than people offering opinions about God.

³ Matthew 3:1-2; Mark 1:4; Luke 7:20

⁴ Other text within the synoptic tradition include, Mat 12:28, 19:24, 21:31, 21:43, Mark 4:11, 4:26,30, 9:1,47, 10:14-15,23-25, 12:34, 14:25, 15:43, Luke 4:43, 6:20, 7:28, 8:1,10, 9:2,11,27, 60, 62, 10:11, 11:20, 13:18,20,28,29, 14:15, 16:16, 17:20,21, 18:17,24,25,29, 19:11, 21:31, 22:16,18, Luke 23:51. Many of these references are utilized in describing what the kingdom of God is like. Hence, they are used so that those who listen would understand the kingdom. Many of these passages do not directly refer to the timing of the kingdom, but Jesus is teaching about vital elements concerning the kingdom and thus becomes important evangelistically.

⁵ Dodd explains, “In the LXX *engizein* is sometimes used (chiefly in past tense) to translate the Hebrew verb *naga* and the Aramaic verb *meta*, both of which mean “to reach,” “to arrive.” The same two verbs are also translated by the verb *phthanein*, which is used in Mt. 12:28, Lk. 11:20. It would appear therefore that no difference of meaning is intended between *ephthasen eph'humas he basileia tou theou*, and *engiken he basileia tou theou*. Both imply the “arrival” of the Kingdom. With an eye on the presumed Aramaic original, we should translate both: “The kingdom of God has come.” *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London, 1935), p. 44

⁶ See also: C.J. Cadoux, *The Historic Mission of Jesus*, (1943); H.A. Guy, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Last Things*, (1948); A.M. Hunter, *Christ and the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press 1980); Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (1952); R.H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*. Thomas Sheehan, *The first coming : how the kingdom of God became Christianity* (New York :

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⁷ Jesus is absolutely clear about His ushering in of the kingdom in Matthew 12:28 when he states, "but if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." This statement sets an unambiguous framework for the reason Christ has the power and authority to cast out demons.

⁸ I am not suggesting that any one of the prophets, especially Ezekiel, is primarily focused on preaching. I am saying, however, that the difficulty he faced in his cultural context and his faithfulness to God's revelation might offer some helpful insight on the way forward.

⁹ This was suggested by Charles F. Pfeiffer *Old Testament History*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids MI 1973)