

**The Application of Missionary Elentics to Preaching to Postmoderns**  
**David A. Ridder**  
**Dean, Bethel Seminary, St. Paul Minnesota**

**Abstract**

How does one preach with authority about sin in a culture of moral relativity? The field of missionary elentics has to do with how people in various cultural contexts experience shame. Rather than preaching about sin from one's own cultural understandings, the missionary must rather speak of moral failure in terms which conscience will ratify in a given cultural context. Applying that discipline to the North American context may help us to speak more effectively to the postmodern moral conscience.

**One Challenge of Postmodernism for the Preacher**

The disconnect between North American church culture and postmodern culture has been widely noted. Reggie McNeal, among others, has argued that church culture is collapsing in the wake of postmodernism's emergence as the prevailing world-view. The values of the church no longer dominate the way Americans believe or behave (McNeal, 2003, p.5). David Olson has warned that postmodernism is one of three critical cultural transitions with which the American church must engage if it is to survive (Olson, 2008, p.163). A host of authors are encouraging the church to adopt a missionary mindset when engaging postmodern culture. In order to proclaim the Gospel effectively in our day, those of us who grew up in the modern American church must learn to communicate cross-culturally. As Graham Johnston puts it:

My appeal is that biblical communication to a postmodern culture should be approached in the same way that a missionary goes into a foreign culture. No missionary worth his or her salt would enter a field without first doing an exhaustive study of the culture he or she seeks to reach. The time has come for today's preachers to don the missionary garb. (Johnston, 2001, p.10)

One aspect of proclaiming the Gospel that demands keen cross-cultural understanding is the discussion of sin. This is especially true as we seek to bridge from the culture of the modern church to the life of the postmodern person who is skeptical of, and even hostile toward those who would impose moral absolutes on others. Postmoderns resist claims of moral certainty. In a postmodern world we assume that we are the arbiters of what is right or wrong for ourselves. The church's opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage are met with angry and vehement charges of intolerance and bigotry. How does one presume to preach about sin in a postmodern climate of moral relativism? Again, Graham Johnston observes:

Likewise, since reality is what one makes it, how will society as a whole handle issues of morality and justice? Who's to say someone is wrong or right? Whose moral standard will speak for all? How can people even speak of common decency anymore? Must the biblical communicator be left with the challenge of

presenting Christ in the relativist context where truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder? (Johnston, p.31)

On the one hand, we might despair that postmodern people are beyond reaching. How will they see their need of Christ if they do not come under the conviction of sin? And how will they be convicted of sin if they do not believe in moral absolutes? If I am the arbiter of what is right or wrong for me, isn't it likely that I will always find a way to justify, or at least rationalize, my actions? And if I can always find a way to justify my actions, how will I ever be brought to admit that I am a sinner in need of salvation?

On the other hand, such skepticism betrays the laziness of one who refuses to do the work of the missionary. The truth is that postmoderns do have consciences that convict them of sin. They may not feel convicted about the same things that we think they should feel convicted about- sexual promiscuity, abortion, homosexuality, foul language or drunkenness, to name a few. But they do experience conviction. The problem is not that postmodern people are beyond reaching, but that we haven't yet become very adept at talking to them about sin. Reggie McNeal says:

We feel we need to convict people of their sin and cause them to repent and change their lives. We want to tell people, "You're all screwed up. You need to clean up your act or you're going to hell." Now I don't disagree that God is in the life-changing business, nor do I diminish the issue of sin and its consequences. But our pickup lines need some serious work. I'm talking about actually gaining a hearing for the gospel in the streets instead of being flipped off. (McNeal, p. 38)

What is called for is an exhaustive study of postmodern culture. Like a missionary going to another country, today's preacher would do well to learn the language and ways of the postmoderns we hope to reach. If we don't, we may never connect with postmoderns in ways they can understand and appreciate. Instead, we will continue to wring our hands over the culture wars and bemoan the difficulty of reaching this generation with the Gospel.

### **The Potential Usefulness of Missionary Elentics**

To this end I would argue that today's preacher would do well to pay attention to the discipline of missionary elentics. The word "elentics" is derived from the Greek root *elencho*, which means to bring to light, expose, convict, reprove, or correct (Baur, Arndt and Gingrich, 1952, p.248). It is most notably used in John 16:8 when Jesus speaks of sending the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." The phrase, "he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin" translates the Greek ελεγξει τον κοσμον περι αμαρτιας. Interestingly, the NIV offers an alternate translation of this phrase in the margin, "he will expose the guilt of the world." The nuance of the former translation suggests that the Spirit functions as a prosecuting attorney bringing charges against the world. The latter

translation implies an educative process whereby the Spirit enables people to understand the real nature of sin. (Stone, 2008, p.6) In either case, it is clear that this is the Spirit's work. The postmodern world is not exempt from having its guilt exposed by the Spirit. Our job is perhaps less about making the world feel guilty about what we find offensive, than about learning where the Spirit is already bringing conviction to the postmodern conscience.

Over seventy years ago, the Dutch missiologist J.H. Bavinck called for a missionary science of elentics, which was to be concerned with understanding the conviction of sin in a given cultural context. Others, such as T. Wayne Dye and Robert J. Priest have made attempts to advance the discipline of elentics. The basic premise is that all people have a moral conscience, but that conscience is culturally conditioned. Romans 2:14-16 is often cited by these authors as a starting point:

**14**(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, **15**since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) **16**This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. (NIV)

This passage informs us that even those without the written law of God have consciences, and that their consciences "bear witness" to their own culpability and moral failure (Priest 1994, p.192). Furthermore, this passage suggests that a person's awareness of what is right and wrong is strongly affected by culture and that God will judge each one on the basis of one's own culturally conditioned conscience (Dye 1976, p.31). On the one hand, Gentiles do not define right and wrong exactly the way Jews do. On the other hand, they have sufficient understanding of right and wrong that one can recognize God's moral law at work in their hearts. They may not feel particularly convicted about eating non-kosher food or violating the Sabbath. Gentile culture doesn't regard such things as morally egregious. But their consciences are likely bothered when they lie, steal, or commit murder. Such things are almost universally regarded as immoral, though cultures may disagree on what constitutes lying, stealing or murder. It's at the point that their own consciences bear witness against them that God holds them accountable. They are held responsible not for the parts of the law they do not have, but for the law they have in their hearts and do not keep. Missionary elentics doesn't see much value in preaching at Gentiles about violating the Sabbath or eating pork. It argues that we will get farther talking to them about ways they have violated their own understandings of right and wrong.

The science of elentics is urgently needed because Joe Missionary often goes to another culture with a heavy load of internalized "cultural baggage." He is most aware of those things in the host culture which would be wrong at home. When Joe preaches against the sins which seem worst to him, listeners in his host culture soon learn what Joe disapproves, but have no idea that he is talking about moral wrong (which they know

about) and a sense of guilt (which they are experiencing). They can't understand what he is driving at (Dye, p.28):

For example, in one area with which I am familiar, the local evangelical missionary is extremely concerned with the problems of polygamy, betel nut chewing and smoking. In the thinking of the local people, good behavior is much more a matter of avoidance of discord in the village than it is of what they "chew". Therefore, disobeying husbands and leaders, refusing hospitality and inter-clan payments and expressing anger are to them far more serious sins.

The local missionary is eager to do what is right, but this is not always communicated to the people. He is extremely stingy with things they would normally share; he doesn't even care enough to learn about their kinship obligations. Furthermore, he appears to be angry ("frustrated," as he sees it) fairly often, so they perceive him as frequently sinning. Local leaders seldom listen to him. Many of his converts have not grasped the meaning of living in obedience to God, and several have fallen into sexual sin.

In contrast, Dye gives an example of how the discipline of missionary elentics helps pave the way for people to hear and respond to the Gospel. In contrast to the missionary who preached about the things in the host culture that seemed most offensive to him, Dye enlisted the help of Bahinemo villagers in translating Jesus' list of sins in Mark 7:

As each sin was described, they gave me the local term for it. They named other sins in their culture.

"What did your ancestors tell you about these things?" I asked them.

"Oh, they told us we shouldn't do any of those things."

"Do you think these were good standards that your ancestors gave you?" They agreed unanimously that they were.

"Well, do you keep all these rules?"

"No," they responded sheepishly.

One leader said, "Definitely not. Who could ever keep them all? We're people of the ground."

I took this opportunity to explain that God expected them to keep their own standards for what is right, that He was angry because they hadn't. Then I pointed out that it was because they fell short of their own standard that God sent His Son to bear their punishment so they could be reunited with Him.

This was a crucial step toward their conversion. For the first time the Scriptures were linked to what God was telling them through their consciences. Within a year most of the people in that village had committed themselves to Christ. (Dye, pp. 39-40)

Could it be that like the missionary who hasn't done the necessary cultural homework, our preaching amounts to condemning postmoderns for not keeping kosher (by the standards of modern American church culture) when we should be talking with them about the things that are already bothering their consciences? In attempting to bridge

from church culture to postmodern culture it is tempting to preach about the things in postmodern culture that are regarded as most offensive in the church. We naturally tend to preach about those things that seem worst to us, whether the conscience of the hearer is bothered by them or not. The result is that the postmodern listener soon learns what behaviors the preacher disapproves of, but dismisses the message as irrelevant because it doesn't speak to the shame that the listener is actually experiencing.

For instance, a postmodern man visiting church with his parents may hear a diatribe against living together before marriage. His parents are hoping he will be convicted by the sermon, but he hears it as hopelessly intolerant and archaic. His culture tells him that living together is no big deal. At the same time, he may be feeling extremely guilty about cheating on his live-in girlfriend. Do we ignore the fact that living together before marriage is wrong? No, but perhaps we don't lead with that sermon. Maybe the place to begin is where the listener is already feeling convicted:

In initial evangelism the missionary should stress sin, guilt, and repentance principally with reference to native conscience- particularly that aspect of their conscience which is in agreement with Scripture... We must preach in such a way that native conscience functions as an independent inner witness to the truth of what is being proclaimed about sinful selves. In this fashion conscience works with the missionary message. (Priest, pp. 309-310)

Maybe the place to begin with our postmodern man is to clue him in that the guilt he feels over his unfaithfulness is due to the fact that it has put him at odds with the God who is utterly faithful, and has made us to be like him. By helping him to understand the nature of unfaithfulness, we also help him to confront the fact that he doesn't measure up, not only to God's standard, but to a standard he himself recognizes. Now we are in a position to discuss what can be done about his guilt. But how will we even know to take this approach unless we are engaged in dialogue with postmoderns and listening in on the postmodern conversation to learn where postmoderns themselves are experiencing a sense of shame, an awareness of not measuring up?

In order to speak to the postmodern conscience effectively, we must do what any good missionary does when initially engaging a new host culture. We must learn how sin is defined for the particular culture (Dye, p.29). This is the fundamental starting point for missionary elentics. As applied to postmoderns, we may safely assume that even those who reject the notion of moral absolutes, especially as revealed in Scripture, still have consciences, experience guilt, and are aware that they don't measure up to their own sense of right and wrong. We may safely assume on the basis of Scripture that the Spirit of God is still in the business of convicting the world concerning sin, and that includes postmoderns. All of this argues that we don't have to preach so as to convict postmoderns of things that our American church culture tells us they should be most bothered about. Rather, the suggestion of missionary elentics is that we study the postmodern conscience to understand where it is already experiencing conviction. The preacher's point of contact with the postmodern conscience is the point at which it is already sensing moral failure under the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

But how does one go about studying the conscience of a culture? Kenneth Pike has suggested that a missionary should study the ethical reactions of a people. Human beings are typically so self-defensive that they seldom admit their standards when their own behavior is in focus (Dye, p.38). We learn the moral standards of a people by observing where they experience outrage or disappointment in the actions of another. Our ethical reactions to the behavior of others reveal something of our sense of right and wrong. Sometimes we have to see the sin in another before we recognize it in ourselves. This is the technique the prophet Nathan used when confronting King David in 2 Samuel 12. He tells David, who is steeped in the culture of sheep-herding, about a rich man who steals a poor man's sheep. David immediately recognizes the injustice of the situation. Then Nathan delivers the knock-out punch, "You are the man!" David's strong reaction to Nathan's story of the poor man's sheep is used to help him see the gravity of what he himself has done by taking Uriah's wife for himself. Nathan knew David well enough to appeal to the shepherd's sense of right and wrong in him. Studying the ethical reactions of a people yields valuable information about what they regard as right and wrong:

The missionary should systematically note when and why people feel offended, unfairly treated, or exploited. What makes them seek revenge? What do they think is fair? What sorts of offenses do they think cause illness or crop failure? From such clues he can learn the ethical system and thus better understand the consciences of those he is trying to reach. (Dye, p.38)

### **Elentic Themes in the Postmodern Conversation**

Following the recommendations of Robert Priest, T. Wayne Dye, and others, I conducted a research project during the last academic year to study the ethical reactions of postmodern people, and of postmodern culture as a whole. The purpose was to gain greater insight into the culturally conditioned postmodern conscience in order to preach about the sins people today are already feeling convicted about, rather than about the sins that most concern American evangelical church culture. Since I came to see this as a missionary enterprise, I engaged the assistance of one who has some training in cultural anthropology. My research assistant, Susan Jedlicka, is a graduate of Bethel Seminary's Global and Contextual Studies program. Her charge was to observe the ethical reactivity of postmodern people and culture. We defined postmodernism quite broadly in recognition that postmodernism is the cultural air that we breathe and the water that we swim in today. Postmoderns include many of the people who sit in the pews of evangelical churches each Sunday, people whose moral formation may be more influenced by Oprah Winfrey than by the Holy Bible. Susan's sources included popular books and magazines, television programs, movies, websites, and conversations with coworkers at a local coffee shop.

Susan began to compile examples of postmodern ethical reactions. We engaged monthly in conversation about what she was seeing and hearing. Over the months a number of themes began to emerge which seemed to be helpful for understanding the postmodern conscience. We see in these themes some of the ways postmoderns experience moral

outrage toward or disappointment in the actions of others. Beyond that, it is out of these themes that a postmodern sense of right and wrong begins to emerge. This sense of right and wrong may seem considerably “dumbed down” from the viewpoint of evangelical church culture. We could wish that postmoderns were more “kosher” in their scruples. But what became apparent to us in our research is that the postmodern sense of right and wrong does, indeed, bear witness to the law of God written on their hearts. It is in these places that we will most likely find the Spirit of God already at work convicting of sin. These would seem to be some of the most promising points of connection for the one who would preach to postmoderns. I offer the following elentic themes, not as polished points of presentation for a sermon, but as some “on-ramps” to consider in preaching to postmoderns about sin.

### 1. Something’s Wrong With This World (And Maybe It’s Me)!

Postmoderns readily acknowledge that there is something wrong in the world. Whether it is school shootings, the war in Iraq, the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis, genocide in Africa, or global warming, the evidence of sin in the world around us is overwhelming. It’s easy to look at the mess the world is in and see that someone is to blame. In fact, the post-modern conscience would insist that it is sinful to live in denial about the violence of the world. In his book *Wicked*, Gregory Maquire, a prominent voice of postmodernism, has one of his characters make such a judgment (Maquire, 1995, p.198):

We don’t embrace violence but we don’t deny its existence- how can we deny it when its effects are all around us? That kind of denial is sin, if anything is...

If the postmodern readily recognizes violence in the world, perhaps a next step is to raise the possibility that we each contribute in some way to what’s wrong with the world. The 2006 Warner Brothers movie *Blood Diamond*, for instance, tells the tale of how my desire to wear a diamond ring may contribute to tribal genocide in Africa. Postmoderns often experience angst about how buying a particular brand of sneakers may contribute to oppressive labor conditions in Asia. They fret about how driving a car contributes to global warming. They buy their coffee from shops that buy only fair-trade coffee beans, so as not to contribute to unfair labor practices around the world.

Many of us in evangelical churches are quick to trivialize such concerns as concessions to liberal guilt and political correctness, certainly not as morally weighty as our concerns about abortion and same-sex marriage. But doesn’t the social sensitivity of the postmodern conscience actually line up quite nicely with the concerns of God for justice as voiced by the prophets?

The Lord enters judgment against the elders  
and leaders of his people:  
“It is you who have ruined my vineyard;  
the plunder from the poor is in your houses.  
What do you mean by crushing my people

and grinding the faces of the poor?”  
 declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.  
 Isaiah 3:14-15 (NIV)

The postmodern concern about violence in our world and the need for social justice would seem to be a place where the Holy Spirit is already at work, convicting the world of sin. We in the church can go on preaching about the offenses of postmoderns that seem worst to us (demanding they be kosher), but we'll likely get farther if we engage the host culture where a sense of guilt is already being experienced. Something is wrong with this world and we've all contributed to the mess. What do I do about my guilt? How do we fix what's wrong with the world? Maybe it's beyond us and we need God to intervene.

## 2. I'm in Pain (And Inflict Pain, Too)!

In order to speak about sin with the postmodern generation, it is helpful to recognize the pain this generation carries as those who have been sinned against. Some of Susan's best work as a cultural anthropologist resulted from conversations she had with coworkers at the coffee shop where she has worked part-time for the last four years. It was at the coffee shop that she had the opportunity to form relationships with people who were struggling to find their place in the world. Some were homosexuals, and most would be labeled as "troubled teens." Most of them felt judged, even hated by Christians, and had little to do with the church.

A common denominator in all their stories was that they were in pain. Significant people in their lives had sinned against them. A lesbian named Sara reported being abused from the time she was an infant. Her family legacy was one of drugs and abandonment. Her rage toward those who hurt her was apparent as she spoke of her upbringing. Tom, a homosexual male, with multiple body piercings, a sarcastic wit and foul mouth, spent his weekends picking up men at a gay bar. He, too, had experienced abuse and neglect growing up. Though he had grown up in church, he no longer attended because he was convinced that Christians hated him. Mike's parents were drug users, who often spent their grocery money on marijuana or cocaine. When he was growing up, there were many nights when there was no food. Mike, too, was a homosexual who had various sexual partners. He also avoided being around Christians for fear of being judged. Kathy was a bisexual who frequently flirted with customers of both sexes and talked about her sexual escapades. In a more serious moment she shared with Susan that she had been sexually abused by her father when she was growing up. Because of the abuse, she was unable to control her sexual appetite. From time to time she would come in with bruises that betrayed the physical abuse going on in her marriage.

As missionaries to postmodern culture we might be inclined to bring to this sorry collection of individuals a sermon that responds to the things in the culture we find most offensive. Who could argue with a rousing sermon on the evils of homosexuality? And yet, if we take time to get to know these folks as Susan did, we may come to understand that there is a better way to connect with the culture of the coffee shop crew. Perhaps the

starting point of the sermon should be, “You are in pain because someone has sinned against you.” Preachers, like myself, who grew up in healthy and stable Christian homes often don’t have a clue about the pain many in our culture have experienced in life. We are quick to see postmoderns as sinners, and miss the fact that they are also victims. To acknowledge the pain and the injustices inflicted on this generation by those who were supposed to have cared for them is probably a good place to start. Most postmoderns have probably never heard that coming from a preacher. My guess is that Sara, Tom, Mike and Kathy, would all be more likely to listen to a sermon that acknowledged their pain, rather than to a sermon that immediately took them to task for their sexual sins.

A preacher who “gets it” in this way is far more likely to be heard by a postmodern audience. The listener who feels understood is much more likely to let the preacher expose how our pain tempts us to inflict pain on others. Tom, for instance, might be willing to explore how in his determination not to be hurt by anyone, he preemptively hurts others with his sarcastic wit and foul mouth. In his pain, he causes pain and becomes like those who have hurt him.

Sara, in particular, was feeling convicted about the anger she carried in her heart toward those who abused and abandoned her as a child. She sometimes unleashed that anger on others. Her journey toward Jesus began with a recognition that she needed to release her anger and forgive those who had hurt her. She gave up her drugs at the same time. As Susan continued to study the Bible with Sara, God continued to reveal areas in her life that needed to change. Though still a self-identified lesbian, she became convicted that fornication was wrong, and announced to Susan her decision not to sleep with anyone again until she was married. The changes taking place in Sara were dramatic.

Granted, Susan worked with Sara one-on-one. A preacher usually doesn’t know all the stories of those in the audience. At the same time, a preacher to postmoderns needs to bring Susan’s sensitivity to the pulpit. The “on-ramp” to the postmodern conscience might be a message that says, “You are in terrible pain. Others have hurt you. When we’re in pain, we often act out in ways that hurt others. The last thing in the world we want is to become like those who hurt us. But that’s what we become. Who can help us break this cycle and heal our pain? Jesus experienced incredible pain and injustice at the hands of others. Let’s see how he might be able to help us.”

### 3. I Did It My Way (And Now Feel So Empty)!

Many postmoderns are searching for a sense of purpose and meaning in life. What they often experience is a sense of alienation and emptiness. The 2007 song “Meant to Live” by the band *Switchfoot* is an anthem of this postmodern longing for something more:

We were meant to live for so much more  
 Have we lost ourselves?  
 Somewhere we live inside  
 Somewhere we live inside  
 We were meant to live for so much more

Have we lost ourselves?  
Somewhere we live inside

In at least some cases this sense of alienation and loneliness derives from making one's own moral determinations in good postmodern fashion. If morality is relative and I am the arbiter of what is right and wrong for me, then I have freedom, apart from external moral constraints, to live life as I please. The postmodern makes choices, but then has to live with the consequences, and the consequences are often surprisingly unpleasant. In the poem "So Young" by Mary Fong, a young woman reflects on being allowed to make her own choices, often foolish ones, without interference. The adults in her life do not intervene to stop her. She's so young, and when you're young you're just supposed to have fun. She is the epitome of a postmodern young adult, left to find her own way. Ultimately, though, her way proves horribly unfulfilling:

I'm telling you it's great being this young  
I'm so young  
I can move to Amsterdam tomorrow  
And spend all my money on hookers and blow  
And my life in Europe could be real bad you know  
It could be real hard  
But you're all just sitting at home in your living rooms  
Waiting for the next postcard for me to tell you I'm having so much fun  
Because that's what you're supposed to do when you're young  
But I'm scared  
And I'm sorry  
And I'm real confused  
And I keep milking this excuse for all it's worth  
Keep keeping too much cash in my purse  
I act like a fool  
I get another tattoo  
That's what I'm supposed to do  
I'm so young  
And all you old people, right  
You sit around and you work your jobs  
Drink tea  
Tell stories about me and about your glory days and sh--  
But deep down I think you'd rather forget  
You'd rather forget just how great it is to be this young.  
(Kraynack and Smith, 2004)

Mary wants her life to have meaning, but because she is not given responsibility and is not held accountable for her actions, she does whatever she wants. Ultimately this freedom is alienating and lonely because she knows she is not living up to the potential within her. Her life has no purpose, rather it is just "fun." (Jedlicka, 2008)

Doug Coupland's book "Life After God" explores these same themes of the postmodern generation. He tells stories of his childhood friends and how the life they lived was carefree and fun. "Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the children of pioneers- life after God- a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven." (Coupland, 1994, p.273) This life that should have been idyllic, without limits, and nothing but fun, does not ultimately seem that way to the author. This dream world where sin is not talked about and people can do whatever they want, turns out not to be fulfilling. His friends end up in various places in life: one contracts HIV, one becomes an alcoholic, one settles down, gets married and has two children, one becomes a tree-planting, drug-using hippy, one goes to work for a software firm and has an affair with her married boss. As he looks back on his life, his evaluation is:

...I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken and I endlessly rehash the compromises I have made in my life....Sometimes I look back on my life and am surprised at the lack of kind things I have done. Sometimes I just feel that there must be another road that can be walked- away from this person I became- either against my will or by default. (Coupland, pp. 309, 313)

Near the end of the book, he makes this remarkable confession:

Now here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God- that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. (Coupland, p.359)

For our purposes, the lesson in this is that the postmodern conscience will sometimes come to the end of itself only to discover, "I did it my way, but now I feel so lost and alone." This would suggest to the preacher that sometimes our best strategy is to be ready to help postmoderns pick up the pieces when they crash and burn. The message these postmoderns need to hear is not, "You've sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God." Some of them have already figured that out. For instance, it's easy to see the Spirit's work of conviction in the confession of Doug Coupland above. What "been-there, done-that, crashed-and-burned" postmoderns need is a preacher who will help them unpack what went wrong, asking, "Well how did that work out for you? Why do you suppose that is?" They need a preacher who won't condemn them for the mistakes they've made, but will help them figure out where meaning and purpose can be found. They need a preacher like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes. In fact, the book of Ecclesiastes may be a good blueprint for how to preach to postmoderns who have lived life their way, but don't like how it has all turned out.

#### 4. I Have Power (And Now It Has Me)!

Postmodernism has always had a fascination with power. The cost of power is a problem that the postmodern French philosopher Michel Foucault explored in his essays on power. Arguing that there are both positive and negative (good and bad) aspects of power, Foucault states, “And isn’t it basically the problem of the cost of power? In reality power is only exercised at a cost.” (Foucault, 1980, p.154)

One of the primary postmodern tenets is that we all have power. One can hardly watch an episode of Oprah Winfrey’s talk show without hearing Oprah or one of her guests encourage audience members to realize the power they have within to change their lives for the better. To use one’s power for noble purposes is a postmodern virtue. Conversely, to use one’s power inappropriately, especially in ways that harm oneself or others, is shameful. The abuse of power is cause for moral outrage in the postmodern context.

This theme of the use and abuse of one’s power is everywhere in our popular culture. One notable place this elentic theme shows up is in today’s superhero movies. The superheroes of my boyhood only had to contend with powers of evil outside of themselves- bad guys, villains and the dreaded Kryptonite. Today’s superheroes not only battle bad guys, but also the darkness within themselves. In a review of the most recent Batman movie (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, July 17, 2008), Tony Gonzales observes:

In “The Dark Knight,” opening today, Batman struggles with the burden of being powerful- the kind of angst seen recently with other blemished, big-screen superheroes. From the heartless womanizing of Iron Man and childhood trauma of the Hulk, to the disheveled heroism of Hancock and the fiery depths of Hellboy, today’s big-screen heroes ward off powerful villains while also battling their own mortal vulnerabilities.

“It has become a very real part of these stories where these characters have to overcome not just that obstacle that is thrown in front of them by the bad guy, but overcome the obstacles within,” said Dan Jurgens, an Edina writer/artist with DC Comics who worked on “Superman” for about a decade.

The moral dilemma faced by today’s superheroes is whether to use power selfishly and destructively, or to use it only for noble purposes. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, J.K. Rowling’s character, Harry Potter discovers a spell book that belonged to a mysterious, but brilliant owner. By using the book, Harry is able to pass his charms lessons with flying colors. Hermione warns Harry on numerous occasions that he shouldn’t use the book, because he doesn’t know who the owner was or what their intentions were in creating the spells. Seeing only that the book helps him in his lessons, Harry continues to unknowingly test the spells in the book. One spell in particular captivates him. The notation beside this spell reads, “For enemies.” Eventually, it happened. Harry finds Draco Malfoy talking with Moaning Myrtle and decides that he is up to trouble. He confronts Malfoy and they get in a fight. During their fight, Harry employs the

Sectumsempra curse on him. Blood immediately flows from Malfoy's face as the curse, which acts as an invisible sword, slashes him.

Harry's misuse of power costs him dearly. He is allotted detention with Severus Snape. His detention time happens to fall over the weekend of the big Quidditch game. Harry, the captain of his team, will not be there to help them play the match. In addition to the physical consequence of detention, he also has to endure the mental anguish of knowing that his foolish use of the spell means that his team may lose the biggest game of the year. Ultimately his team does win, but Harry is not the hero of the game, it is won without him.

The temptation to abuse one's power is also an important theme in the movie *Spiderman 3*. A meteor drops a substance on earth that enhances the rage of the person who comes in contact with it. This substance takes over Peter's spiderman suit, turning it black, and revealing the dark side of Peter. When Peter puts on the black suit, his response is, "This suit, where'd this come from? The power, feels good.... But you lose yourself to it..." Fortunately, Peter has caring people who speak into his life. His Aunt tells him, "We've all done terrible things to each other, but we have to forgive each other. Or everything we ever were will mean nothing." After a time of Peter carelessly using his power to hurt others, the wise words of his aunt penetrate the darkness that has begun controlling him.

Eventually Peter confronts the dark side of his nature and struggles to remove the suit, only to have it fall on Eddie Brock, whom Peter has humiliated and who now wants to kill him. As they are fighting at the end of the movie, Peter tries to convince Eddie to take off the suit and redeem himself. He tells Eddie, "The power; it feels good. But you'll lose yourself to it. It'll destroy you." Eddie's thirst for revenge, however, is all-encompassing and he can't give up the suit. Consequently, the suit destroys him.

At the end of the movie, Peter recognizes the lessons he has learned and the struggle to use his own power for good or for bad. "Whatever comes our way, whatever battle we have raging inside us, we always have a choice. My friend Harry taught me that. He chose to be the best of himself. It's the choices that make us who we are, and we can always choose to do what's right." (All *Spiderman 3* quotes are from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0413300/quotes>, viewed on 1/28/2008)

We can take away several lessons from these examples for our purposes. First, a basic postmodern assumption is that we all have power, and that power can be used for good or for evil. Second, postmoderns identify strongly with today's flawed and struggling superheroes, because we've all known that temptation to use power selfishly in destructive ways. Third, there is an awareness that power is exercised at a cost. I must expect there to be unpleasant consequences if I misuse my power. Fourth, the postmodern depiction of superheroes recognizes that when power is misused it can enslave. The power I had now has me! And once in the grip of that power, it requires a mighty struggle to get free. Fifth, there is an assumption that though it may require all our effort, we are capable of setting ourselves free.

The first four lessons may be readily and usefully employed by the preacher to help a postmodern listener explore his or her own moral condition. We've all exercised our will (power), made selfish choices, experienced unpleasant consequences, and felt enslaved by those decisions. The power does feel good, but we lose ourselves to it. It starts to destroy us. Anyone struggling with an addiction or destructive habit can tell you that. And so in the postmodern morality play, the hero must struggle to be set free. And as the story is told, the hero almost always succeeds.

It is in challenging this final piece, the assumption that we are capable of setting ourselves free that we may find a powerful opening for the Gospel. Batman may succeed in overcoming his dark side by the time the movie ends, but that is rarely our experience. Peter Parker successfully frees himself of the black suit, but we're more like his friend Eddie. We can't give it up. In the end, I'm not as powerful as I thought. I need someone else to set me free. Romans 7 may baffle many of our church-going regulars, but postmoderns will get it. We need to preach it.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that we need to approach postmodern culture in North America as missionaries would approach a host culture anywhere in the world. Part of our task is to learn how postmodern culture understands sin. The discipline of missionary ethnics can help us with this endeavor. As we observe our culture and listen in on the postmodern conversation, certain themes begin to emerge that help us understand where the Spirit of God may be bringing conviction to the postmodern conscience. I have suggested several potential "on-ramps" for those who would preach to postmoderns about sin. Rather than speaking to postmoderns about the things we in the church find most offensive, perhaps we can learn to join the Spirit where he is already speaking to them.

### Reference List

- Baur, W., Arndt, W. and Gingrich, F.W. 1952. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Coupland, Douglas. 1994. *Life After God*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Dye, T. Wayne. 1976. Toward a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin. *Missiology: An International Review* IV (1): 27-41.
- Foucault, Michel, edited by Colin Gordon. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Jelicka, Susan. 2008. "Sin-Personal Stories of Postmoderns." Unpublished notes.
- Johnston, Graham. 2001. *Preaching to a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Kraynak, Joe. and Smith, Marc Kelley. 2004. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry*. New York: Alpha Books.
- Maquire, Gregory. 1995. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: Regan Books.
- McNeal, Reggie. 2003. *The Present Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Olson, David T. 2008. *The American Church in Crisis*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Priest, Robert J. 1994. Missionary Elentics: Conscience and Culture. *Missiology: An International Review* XXII (3): 291-315.
- Rowling, J.K. 2005. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.
- Stone, Wilbur. 2008. "Prophet or Priest? The Paradox of Ministry." Unpublished paper.