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*Sage Preaching for
Postmodern Contexts*



Zachary Eswine

Our moment in history has a moody expression, and preachers are understandably uneasy. Our Lord is calling us to preach at the end of a time of familiarity and amid an historic change of mind. "This raises unique problems in how to communicate God's message," because "the postmodern mindset is not exclusive to the unchurched."¹ As our campus ministers will tell us, postmodernism also forms part of the clothing worn by those "in the church." With such specters moving in close, homiletic voices are varied and sometimes opposite in direction for those trying to navigate their way through this unexplored terrain. Since postmodernism has moved into both theoretical and "folk"² territories, we have scrambled for guides and paths. These guides and paths carry names such as new, post-liberal, revisionist, liberation, post-modern, apologetic, post-evangelical, "emerging," and "other-wise." These perspectives for preaching and ministry, evidence our growing recognition that "change" describes our times.

Postmodernism is not, however, our only new neighbor. For those in the West, particularly in America, the prominent seats at the cultural table that Christians once enjoyed are gradually being given to others. We sit stunned amid our decline of influence. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, "We

are not sure whether, as Christians, we ought to or can return to times when the church at least allegedly seemed to have status if not power or whether we must seek some yet undetermined more modest stance in liberal societies."³

Furthermore, postmodernism and post-Christendom are newer kids on the block but not the only ones in the neighborhood. Modernism's dark side with its consumerism, material gain, mechanical life-descriptions, driven-ness to achieve, and individualism remain. Added to these is the loss of relational stamina due to social and family brokenness and the biblical unfamiliarity that accompanies fewer visits or concerns with Christ among our communities. In addition, the largest senior population in history requires a gospel attention unrelated to postmodern concerns, while the global cultures moving into our communities may prove "pre-modern" according to our time-classifications.

In short, we preachers have become a society of the bewildered—outflanked by a swift advance and confounded by a startling complexity. I find myself wondering out loud if the Wisdom Literature of the Bible might offer us some aid.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

One preacher has described the contemporary situation of preaching. He says:

There are many signs at the present moment of the increasing secularizing of our churches. The individualism of our services, their casual character, their romantic and sentimental music, their minimizing of the offices of prayer and devotion, their increasing turning of the pulpit into a forum for political discussion and a place of common entertainment all indicate it. . . . We are pretty largely today playing our game the world's way. We are adopting the methods and accepting the standards of the market.⁴

What is fascinating is to realize that Albert Fitch made this observation in 1920. "Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new?'" (Ecclesiastes 1:10). The sage exposes our

glamorizing tendency. He teaches us to assume amid our hardest and longest miles that the former days were not necessarily better than our present ones (Ecclesiastes 7:10). Instead, we are meant to learn that each season of time, even those of mourning, tearing down, or re-building, is governed by God and made beautiful by him (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Our present time is no exception.

Likewise, "No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord" (Proverbs 21:30–31). No "post-" or "-ism" that preachers will confront can frighten God. "Isms," after all, are fashioned by human hands. "Isms" cannot undo the eternity set in the hearts of those who fashion them (Ecclesiastes 3:11). They must show forth the beauty and glory of God like glimpses of the sun tearing open the thunderclouds and reaching the ground. Like any other "ism," post-modernism will also force into the world that ancient and recycled potential to scar lands and peoples. It is creaturely in its source, with no proper claim to divinity and every potential to damage.

For these reasons, the sage recognizes that every season of life avoids characterizations of sweeping generalization. There exists in the details of each time and place both wisdom and madness (Ecclesiastes 2:12).

SAGE EXPLORATIONS OF WISDOM AND MADNESS

Graham Johnston reminds preachers that "the Christian outlook is neither wholly modern nor postmodern."⁵ Both reflect the human heart trying to respond to a fallen world. Preachers can learn to understand the wisdom and madness of every "ism." Since the wisdom of modernism and the follies of postmodernism are more readily discussed, let's view each "ism" for a moment in reverse.

MODERNISM LEANING TOWARD MADNESS

In the Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching, Albert Fitch, writing just after the end of World War I, observed the negative impact of modernism⁶ on Christian preaching. Writing eighty-five years ago he described: *Preaching about God*: "The

contemporary sermon," he said, "starves one fundamental impulse in man—the need and desire to look up." *Regarding preaching Jesus*: "With its unified cosmos, its immanent God, its exalted humanity," Fitch said, [Jesus] "is not so much a divine revelation as a human achievement." *Furthermore, when preaching for conversion*: "We are preaching to educate, not to save; to instruct, not to transform." *Sermons seem focused on an individualized ethic*: Fitch noticed "the relative absence of the sense of moral responsibility for the social order." At the same time preaching became depersonalized. Fitch argued that we "stripped preaching of the emotional energy, of the universal human interests and the prophetic insight which only love can bestow."⁷

In response to modernism's impact, Fitch urged those in the roaring twenties that the "time was ripe" and that "contemporary preaching" had a "fertile field" if preachers would learn to define effective preaching "chiefly with transcendent values." "To think that this world is all," Fitch continued, "is to lean toward madness."

The preacher must give himself therefore to *combat the modern interpretation of humanity*. "You are something more than physical hunger and reproductive instinct." Our preaching, he said, must therefore emphasize the "more-than-natural in man." *He must also combat the modern interpretation of salvation*. "If man is to live by the law of more-than-nature, then he must have something also more-than-human to help him in his task. He will need strength from the outside." *The modern interpretation of knowing is also not without its faults*. "The humanist believes that understanding takes the place of faith," Fitch observed. It says that "what men need is not to be redeemed from their sins, but to be educated out of their follies." But "knowledge and virtue are not identical . . . you do not make a man moral by enlightening him" because of the "perverted joy" the "secret delight" that people have "in denying their own understanding." Furthermore, we do not need to be concerned "if the intellect cannot perfectly order or easily demonstrate the whole of the religious life, fit each element with a self-verifying defense and explanation." *Likewise Fitch*

urged preachers to combat the modern interpretation of God: We need "the clear proclamation of the superhuman God." Fitch declared that it is certain that what has hastened our decline is "the removal of Jesus the Savior, the divine Redeemer, the absolute Meeter of an absolute need" from the "forefront of our consciousness." *Finally, Fitch argued the preacher must combat the modern dualism*. "Ours is no mechanically divided world where man and God, nature and supernature, soul and body, belong to mutually exclusive territories." We "delight in beauty" and recall "the splendors of the external world" not to "worship nature" but "the God of nature." "We all need God to explain the world."⁸

POSTMODERNISM LEANING TOWARD WISDOM

The sage reminds preachers that wisdom and folly both exist in the world. As Fitch observed at the turn of the twentieth century, modernism is not without folly. So at the turn of the twenty-first century, preachers are helped by the biblical sage to remember that postmodernism is not without wisdom.

KNOWING

To begin, postmodernism is *skeptical*. The Bible acknowledges skepticism of a certain kind. "The one who states his case first seems right," it says, "until the other comes and examines him" (Proverbs 18:17; 14:15). The wise wait, listen, and ponder before making assertions. They are skeptical not of God, but of men.

Likewise, reason is valued but assumed faulty. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Proverbs 16:25). Only God has exhaustive knowledge. Solomon testifies, "I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me" (Ecclesiastes 7:23). For all that we know of God, we are only "at the edges" of God's ways, Job says "how small a whisper do we hear of him!" (Job 26:14).

Furthermore, the Wisdom Literature assumes that what one can know of God requires more than the action of man's reason. Revelation is necessary. Therefore, we find knowledge

by "calling out" for it and "raising our voice" to God (Proverbs 2:4–6).

These hints from the wise man reminds the preacher that he does not have to fear admitting what he does not know. Nor does he have to appear as if what he does know is exhaustive or completely correct in all of its parts. Gaining wisdom requires more than human reason. In fact, the Wisdom Literature assumes that it is the foolish and not the wise who claim exhaustive knowledge and leave no room for the mysteries of God (Proverbs 18:2). Some aspects of postmodern concerns with knowing have a prior origin in the wisdom literature of the Bible.

SPIRITUALITY

Postmodern people value the supernatural, the use of metaphor, the validity of experience, and the recognition that nature is not a machine. The Wisdom Literature likewise assumes supernatural realities (Job 1:6–7), and to borrow a phrase from Wendell Berry, the sage possesses no "indoor piety." Birds and flowers, spiders and creeks, beckon his attention with no guilty sense of time or waste. In addition, personal experience is valued. Words actually affect the soul; joy and wisdom are the provision of God, and the Spirit of God is given in the wisdom context of repentance (Proverbs 1:23). Furthermore, the inward thoughts and feelings of Job and of the "preacher" of Ecclesiastes are made transparent, as are the hopes and convictions of the father for his son in the book of Proverbs. Likewise, the Song of Solomon transparently pursues the love that leads to marriage. He makes us blush about this in ways that seem foreign to him.

COMMUNITY

Postmoderns value relationships, incarnation, shared space, and time. The wise man likewise assumes community. "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment" (Proverbs 18:1). Proverbs assumes the daily impact of extended family, marriage, siblings, friends, and counselors. Significantly, doctrine is learned in

relationship to others and not in isolation from them (Proverbs 13:20; 22:24–25). Preachers need not fear coming out of their study and away from programs to learn of God. Doctrinal discussion devoid of relational contexts is foreign not only to postmoderns, but to the wise.

ICONIC FAMILIARITY

In addition, visual media and technology for the physical eyes are assumed for postmodern contexts. The wise man likewise teaches "us to use our eyes as well as our ears to learn the ways of God and man."⁹ He is constantly watching people and places, observing them and bringing human ways to our attention. Iconic media, however, does not require electricity. His assumption to watch the non-virtual world can help lift eyes well trained to look off the screen and onto the community of people they so value.

FELT BROKENNESS

Furthermore, postmodern issues involve moving beyond our bent to herd beauty or decay into generalizations, slogans, or formulaic answers. Important for this realism is that the biblical sage does not "use texts as a substitute for dealing with life."¹⁰

The sage is not entertained by folly, but he does learn from it, so he can wisely deconstruct it with its various costumes, for our health. Walk through the Wisdom Literature and take note of the questions it asks. These questions are real and complex, engaging the full range of human life and longing in a fallen world. The sage un.masks what tempts us, taking human pain and desire seriously, because we are creatures who need our Creator's conversation.

BIBLICALLY UNINFORMED

Post-Christian conversations also find help in the Wisdom Literature. The communities we preach in have a growing population that looks at life with no church, no Sunday school, and no Biblical frame of reference. Like the prophetic/priestly paradigms, God's Word for the wise is true and absolute. But

unlike the prophetic/priestly literature, the role of the exodus and repentance toward covenant renewal plays only an implicit part of the Wisdom Literature. Wisdom has a "generic" ethos that is not dependent upon an "upfront" understanding of God as savior in order for meaningful learning about God.¹¹ Such a paradigm may lend aid to communicative models that encounter hearers increasingly ignorant of biblical stories and assumptions.

WISDOM ABSENCE AND EMERGENCE FOR HOMILETICS

Importantly, homiletics is generally unaccustomed to actively viewing preaching from a Wisdom perspective because of its theological and historical foundations. The absence of a wisdom perspective hinders homiletic attempts to address postmodern challenges.

THROWN INTO THE SHADE

Theologically, long before those outside evangelicalism asserted an interest in recovering the notion of Jesus as Sage¹², W. T. Davison, in 1894, noted how the Old Testament sage was seemingly "thrown into the shade" by the "superior brilliance and importance of prophets, priests and psalmists."¹³ As scholar John Johnson has more recently stated, "By the time of Luther and Calvin, the three offices of prophet, priest, and king became the central organizing principle of Protestant Christological teaching." As Johnson suggests, it might seem "reasonable . . . to add a fourth office . . . namely, the sage."¹⁴

Regardless of our response to the theological assertions of Johnson and others, evangelical preachers instinctively recognize that our preaching models have historically assumed a prophetic/priestly¹⁵ paradigm. John Broadus, for example, uniquely includes Solomon as an exemplar of preaching in the Old Testament. He points to Ecclesiastes as joining a "certain class of sermons" but goes no further, preferring prophetic models for the student's study.¹⁶ Edwin Dargan similarly looks to Proverbs and the preacher of Ecclesiastes for "hints" regarding "the preparation of . . . religious teachers,"¹⁷ but he

also stops there. A biblically thought-out wisdom shape for preaching still needs harvest.

GOD PREACHES AS A SAGE SOMETIMES

Why should the absence of a wisdom paradigm for preaching concern us?

First, as J. I. Packer once said, "The Bible is God preaching."¹⁸ Our affirmations concerning the infallibility of the Bible do not exclude the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Because the Bible forms the collected sermons of God, and the Wisdom Books form a part of that collection, when God then "preached" to humanity, he did not limit his speech to prophetic and/or priestly forms. Strange for many of us, the Wisdom Literature reminds us that God has not been squeamish about speaking with riddles, maxims, metaphors, or poetry to his people.¹⁹ He has not been afraid of transparency, mystery, emotion, appeals to nature, or an intimate familiarity with the beauties and messages of people and things. "The voice of the Old Testament has many accents," writes Derek Kidner, including "a whole world of poetry, law, story-telling, psalmody and vision."²⁰ Hughes Oliphant Old, in his important series on the history of preaching, notably observes the influence of wisdom on preaching. He concludes, "If there is a covenantal theology of preaching, and if it is complemented by a prophetic theology of preaching, then we must add to this a sapiential²¹ theology of preaching."²²

We must learn to concern ourselves with Wisdom paradigms for communication, because the Bible presents them to us as God's speech.

Second, the reason we must concern ourselves with the absence of the Biblical Wisdom Literature for our homiletics is because, as we have introduced, these sections of the Bible may offer an electricity of Biblical light for postmodern concerns which frees us from nonbiblical paths for our homiletic solutions.

Third, perhaps the greatest incentive for preachers in these times to develop their ministry through a perspective that is

prophetic, priestly, and sagacious,²³ is found in the centrality of Jesus as the fulfillment of Wisdom. The New Testament assumes among other things that Jesus is the Sage of sages.²⁴ Christ is our wisdom, and in him "one greater than Solomon has come." Jesus said that he would send "prophets and wise men and scribes" into the world (Matthew 23:34). What would it look like for us as preachers to learn again how to see Christ as our wisdom and follow his prophetic/priestly/wisdom lead into the world?

CONCLUSION

Preachers are called to herald the good news in a strange moment. The moment is strange to us because of a convergence of titans monumental, all vying for dominance amid the mundane realities of love and work, play and suffering, in our local congregations. Because of this we are understandably uneasy and looking for clear paths of truth on which to walk. I have assumed in this article the necessity and integrity of our prophetic and priestly models for biblical preaching. My concern has been not to usurp these models but to state that the absence of a Wisdom approach may unduly shape both the questions we ask and the answers we offer regarding homiletics amid the advancing "isms" of our generation. By remembering to include the sage alongside our prophetic and priestly models for ministry, preachers can discover again that God is Lord even of poetry and mystery. Preachers can overcome their sage-blindness by learning to hold the hand of God's willingness to enter poetic and mysterious landscapes. To do so is to recognize that postmodernism did not create such landscapes. It only imitates a previous wisdom or distorts it with a recycled madness.

This imperfect article is a call for counsel among a community of preachers. May we begin in toiling the soil of biblical Wisdom? To do so, I think, may lead us toward a fuller theology and practice for preaching, more able from God to engage our turn at time.

Author

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Notes

1. Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 9.
2. Ronald Allen, ed., *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1997).
3. Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23.
4. Albert Parker Fitch, *Preaching and Paganism, The Forty-Sixth Series of the Lyman Beecher Lectureship on Preaching at Yale University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), 98. While evangelicals will not embrace every aspect of Fitch's doctrinal position, his analysis of modernism and offered remedies are well worth our consideration.
5. Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, 9.
6. By "modernism," Fitch means the convergence of naturalism and humanism.
7. Fitch, *Preaching and Paganism*, 61-71.
8. Fitch, *Preaching and Paganism*, chapters 5-6. Noticeably absent from Fitch's observations is a statement regarding the role of the Bible in responding to modernism's hindrances. He later argues for a doctrinal approach to preaching over against the expository method he encountered in his day, which he felt tended toward the humanistic tendency.
9. Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance in The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1976), 13.

10. Charles F. Melchert, *Wise Teaching: Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), 273.
11. See, for example, Daniel J. Estes, *Hear, My Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1–9* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997), 88. Estes notes: "The Wisdom Literature . . . nearly always views life in generic terms. Unlike the legal, historical, prophetic and hymnic literature of the Old Testament, the wisdom texts contain no explicit references to events in the history of Israel."
12. See, for example, Rudolph Bultmann, "Jesus as the Teacher of Wisdom," in his *The History of the Synoptic Condition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 69–108; Bernard Brandon Scott, "Jesus as Sage: An Innovating Voice in Common Wisdom," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 399–415.; Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1994).
13. W. T. Davison, *The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1894), 4.
14. John Johnson, "The Old Testament Offices as Paradigm for Pastoral Identity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April–June, 1995): 183.
15. Some who emphasize the clerical rather than the teaching function of the Old Testament priest largely limit Old Testament homiletic paradigms to those which are prophetic. See John Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1876), 10. "You are no doubt all aware that the New Testament minister corresponds not at all to the Old Testament priest, but in important respects to the Old Testament prophet." See also, John Ker, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 16.
16. Broadus, *Lectures*, 10.
17. Dargan, *The Art of Preaching*, 20.
18. Quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982), 103.
19. For explorations of wisdom for ministry, see Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972).
20. Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, 13.
21. "Sapiential" means "wise or deep with discernment."
22. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, Vol. 1 *The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 92. Old's important contribution describes the sage in scribal terms. Some distinctions between the wise man of the Wisdom Literature and the scribe are therefore underestimated.
23. Davison assumes that the connection between Old Testament sages and contemporary pastor-teachers is explicit. See *Wisdom Literature*, 5.
24. See, for example, Matthew 12:42ff.; 1 Corinthians 1:22–25; Colossians 2:3.